

them probably not even fluent in English, let alone being native speakers) and French loanwords had introduced a fair amount of confusion into the spelling system of English. For instance, Old English had used the grapheme <c> to spell /k/ and /č/, and <s> to spell /s/. Under French influence, /č/ came to be spelled <ch>, and <c> was used not only for /k/ but also for /s/ in loans from French (*coat*, *city*) and even in native English words (*mice*, *since*).

To make matters worse for the historian of the language, the new standard English that arose in the fourteenth century was not a direct descendant of West Saxon, the dialect in which most of our Old English texts survive. Instead, the new standard in Middle English was based on London speech, essentially an East Midlands dialect, although with some unique characteristics and some features of other dialects. Our discussion of Middle English is necessarily based on this London dialect (roughly, the dialect of Chaucer’s writings) and not on the Southern dialect that was a direct descendant of West Saxon.

Consonants

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the inventory of consonants in Old English did not differ dramatically from that of Present-Day English. The Middle English inventory, not surprisingly, looks even more like that of Present-Day English; indeed, it lacks only phonemic /ŋ/ and /ʒ/ to be identical.

Voicing of Fricatives Table 6.1 shows the Middle English consonants. Comparing Table 6.1 with Table 5.1, we see that the only systemwide change between the consonants of Old English and those of Middle English is the addition of phonemic voiced fricatives, the shaded consonants in Table 6.1. (Voiced fricatives did occur in Old English, but only as allophones of voiceless fricatives.) None of the Old English consonant phonemes were lost between Old English and Middle English.

W 6.3

T A B L E 6.1 Middle English Consonants

Manner of Articulation		Point of Articulation				
		Bilabial	Labiodental	Interdental	Alveolar	Alveopalatal Velar
Stops	voiceless	p			t	k
	voiced	b			d	g
Affricates	voiceless					č
	voiced					ǰ
Fricatives	voiceless		f	θ	s	š
	voiced		v	ð	z	h
Nasals		m			n	
Lateral					l	
Retroflex					r	
Semivowels		w				j

Why, when English had gotten along nicely for half a millennium without a voiced/voiceless contrast in its fricatives, should it develop one during the Middle English period? A combination of factors contributed to the change, notably, the influx of loanwords, mixture of dialects, assimilation, and the voicing of fricatives in function words.

- *Loanwords.* One pressure came from the great influx of loanwords. French already had a phonemic distinction between /f/ and /v/, so, in English, the only difference between loans such as *vine* and *fine* or between the French loans *vetch*, *view*, and *vile* and English *fetch*, *few*, and *file*, respectively, would have been the voiced /v/. French, however, did not have /z/ in initial position, and it did not have the sounds /θ/ or /ð/ at all. Nor were the loanwords with contrasting /f/ and /v/ numerous. Besides, languages can easily tolerate a few homophones. Therefore, the French influence alone would scarcely have been adequate to effect a structural change in the English phonological system.
- *Dialect mixture.* Another impetus to the development of voiced fricative phonemes was dialect mixture. Even in Old English, some Southern dialects were apparently voicing all fricatives in initial position (synn ‘sin’ was /zyn:/ not /syn:/), although this pronunciation was not usually reflected in the standardized spelling of Old English. With the increased communication between regions during the course of Middle English, speakers from various areas would have become accustomed to hearing both voiced and voiceless fricatives at the beginning of words.¹
- *Assimilation.* A third source of contrastive voiced fricatives was the loss of final vowels. In Old English, fricatives were voiced only when surrounded by voiced sounds. For example, in most forms of the verb *husian* /huzian/ ‘to house’, the *s* was pronounced /z/ because it was preceded and followed by a vowel, a voiced sound. After the loss of the final /n/ and then the preceding vowel or vowels, the *s* stood in final position in many forms. Nevertheless, it retained its /z/ pronunciation, thus contrasting directly with the singular noun *house* (OE *hus*, /hus/), which had always been pronounced with a final /s/.²
- *Function words.* A fourth development producing voiced fricatives in previously unvoiced positions was the voicing of fricatives in very lightly stressed words, especially function words like *is*, *was*, *of*, *his*, *the*, *then*, *that*, and *they*. The usual explanation is that voiced consonants require less energy to produce than do unvoiced consonants; we can still observe the process in the PDE variant pronunciations of *with* as either /wɪθ/ or /wɪð/.

1. Although the Midlands and Northern forms usually prevailed, PDE still retains the Southern *vixen* beside the Midlands *fox*. The Southern form *vat* ousted the Midlands *fat* in most dialects only after the eighteenth century; colonial New England records still have the spelling *fat*.

2. This distinction in *house* as a noun and *house* as a verb is retained in PDE, despite the identity in spelling. Parallel distinctions remain in such pairs of related forms as *deave/cleft*, *lose/lost*, and *bathe/bath*. In Old English, a number of nouns had a vowel in plural endings that did not appear in the nominative singular (nom. sg. *cnif* ‘knife’/nom. pl. *cnifas*). Here also, the alternation in the voicing of the final consonant of the stem remains to this day in such words as *knife/knives*, *path/paths*, and, of course, the noun *house/houses*.

The voiced fricatives became phonemic in English hundreds of years ago, ample time, we might think, for the newcomers to become completely naturalized. Yet /v/, /ð/, and /z/ are still more limited in their distribution than most other English consonants. Almost all words beginning with /v/ or /z/ are loanwords, and only function words like the definite article, the demonstrative pronouns, the third-person plural pronouns, and adverbs like *then*, *thus*, and *there* have initial /ð/. (Try it; how would you pronounce a new word spelled *thale* or *thorvine*?)

Even though /f/, /θ/, and /s/ developed corresponding voiced phonemes during Middle English, /ʃ/ did not. Voiced /ʒ/ was not to become phonemic until the Early Modern English period and then under highly limited conditions. Also, /ŋ/ was not yet phonemic in Middle English. The consonant /h/ still could appear after vowels or consonants in the form of the allophones [ç] (ME *niht* [niçt] ‘night’) and [x] (ME *thurh* /θurx/) ‘through’.

Changes in Distribution of Consonants Although the only systemwide change in the English consonant inventory between Old and Middle English was the addition of phonemically voiced fricatives, numerous adjustments within the system affected the distribution of individual consonants. Some of these changes were systemic; that is, they occurred wherever the conditioning factors appeared. Other changes were sporadic, occurring under given conditions in some words but not in others. Among the systemic changes were loss of long consonants, loss of initial /h/ before certain consonants, loss of [ɣ] as an allophone of /g/, and loss of /j/ in the prefix *ge-*.

- **Loss of long consonants.** As noted in Chapter 5, Old English had had phonemically long consonants; that is, words could be distinguished on the basis of the time spent in producing the consonant. For example, the word “bed” (prayer) was pronounced /bed/ and the word “bedd” (bed) was pronounced /bed:/, with distinct utterance of the final *d*. This distinction was probably being lost at the end of words by late Old English and was lost in all positions by the end of Middle English. Hence the difference between such Old English words as *man* ‘indefinite pronoun, one’ and *mann* ‘man, mankind’ disappeared.
- **Loss of initial /h/ sound.** The consonant /h/ was regularly lost in the clusters /hl/, /hn/, and /hr/. In some dialects /h/ was also lost before /w/, but other dialects have of course retained /hw/ to the present day (as in *what*, *whale*, *whimper*). Examples include the change from Old English *hlǣfdige* /hlǣfdij/ ‘lady’, *hnecca* /hnec:a/ ‘neck’, and *hræfn* /hrævn/ ‘raven’ to late Middle English *ladi*, *necke*, and *raven*.
- **Loss of [ɣ] sound.** The Old English allophone [ɣ] of the phoneme /g/ regularly vocalized (made a vowel) or became the semivowel /w/ after /l/ and /r/. Thus Old English *swelgan* [swelyan] ‘to swallow’ and the *fēolaga* [fēolayə] ‘partner’ became Middle English *swolwen* /swolwən/ and *fēlawe* /felawə/. Old English *morgen* [moryən] ‘morning’ and *sorg* [soryɣ] ‘sorrow’ became Middle English *morwen* /morwən/ and *sorow* /soro/.

- **Loss of /j/ in the prefix ge-.** The very common Old English prefix *ge-* (pronounced /je/ or /ji/) lost its initial consonant sound and was reduced to /i/, spelled *y* or *i*. Thus, for example, Old English *genog* /jeno/ ‘enough’, ME [ɪnux]; and OE *genumen* /jɪnumən/ ‘taken’, ME *inome(n)* /ɪmomən/.

Among the sporadic changes in consonants during Middle English are the voicing of fricatives under certain conditions, the loss of unstressed final consonants, the simplification of consonant clusters, and the appearance of intrusive consonants.

- **Voicing of fricatives.** Initial and final fricatives of words that normally received very light stress (e.g., *is*, *the*, *of*) tended to become voiced in Middle English. However, voicing did not occur (or at least did not remain) in similar words like *for* and *so*. In addition, the final *-s* of plurals and third-person singular present indicative verbs became voiced after voiced sounds but remained voiceless after voiceless sounds through assimilation. Compare the pronunciation of *flies* /flaɪz/ with *takes* /teks/. The voiced vowel sound causes the inflectional ending to be pronounced as the voiced /z/. The voiceless /k/ causes the final ⟨s⟩ to be pronounced as the voiceless /s/.
- **Loss of unstressed final consonants.** Unstressed final consonants following a vowel tended to be lost in Middle English. Thus OE *ic* ‘I’ became ME *i* and the OE adjective ending *-lic* became ME *-ly*. Examples of this change can be seen in the words OE *gastlic*, ME *goostly* (‘ghostly’); OE *anli*, ME *only*; and OE *heofonlic*, ME *heavenly*. In OE, a final *-n* had characterized various parts of verbal paradigms, including the infinitive, the plural subjunctive, and the plural preterite indicative. During the course of ME, final *-n* was lost in all these positions; it has remained, however, in the past participle of many strong verbs (*seen*, *gone*, *taken*). Final *-n* was also lost in the possessive adjectives *my* and *thy* before words beginning with a consonant sound and in the indefinite article *an*, but remained in the possessive pronouns *mine* and *thine*.
- **Simplification of consonant clusters.** Certain consonants tended to be lost when they appeared in clusters with other consonants.
 - a. The semivowel /w/ dropped after /s/ or /t/, though it is sometimes still retained in spelling: *sword*, *sister* (OE *sweostor*), *such* (OE *swilc*), *sough* (OE *swogan*), and *two*. It was retained after /s/ or /t/ in such words as *swallow*, *swim*, *swelter*, *twin*, and *twain*.
 - b. The consonant /l/ was lost in the vicinity of /č/ in the adjectival pronouns *each*, *such*, *which*, and *much* (OE *ælc*, *swilc*, *hwilc*, and *micel*). However, in some other words, /l/ remained in this environment (*filch*, *milch*).
 - c. The fricative /v/ tended to drop out before a consonant or vowel plus consonant. Compare OE *hlāford* ‘lord’, *hlāfdige* ‘lady’, *hēafod* ‘head’, and *hæfde* ‘had’ with ME *lord*, *ladi*, *hed*, *hadde*. The /v/ was not lost in such words as OE *heofon* ‘heaven’, *hræfn* ‘raven’, or *dreflian* ‘to drivel’.

- d. By the end of ME, at least, a final /b/ after /m/ was being lost in pronunciation, though not in spelling (*lamb*, *comb*, *climb*), but the cluster /mb/ remained in medial positions (*timber*, *amble*).

Intrusive consonants. Consonants inserted into the middle of words appeared, especially before the resonants /l/, /r/, and /n/, in many words in Middle English.

- a. Intrusive /b/ after /m/ was common: OE *brēmel* ‘bramble’, *nāmel* ‘nimble’, *āmerge* ‘ember’ became *bremble*, *nimble*, and *ember* in ME. However, this development was not universal: OE *hamor* ‘hammer’ and *camel* ‘camel’ developed no such intrusive /b/. In a few words, an intrusive /b/ appeared after final /m/ in ME, though it was later lost in pronunciation. Thus OE *þūma* ‘thumb’, ME *thombe*; compare the PDE pronunciation of *thumb* with its derivative *thimble* (OE *þȳmel*).
- b. Parallel to intrusive /b/ after /m/ was intrusive /d/ after /n/ in final position or before a resonant: OE *dwīnan*, ME *dwindle*; OE *þunor*, ME *thunder*; late ME *sound* from Old French *son* ‘noise’. Again, this was not consistent; OE *fenol* ‘fennel’ and *canne* ‘metal container’ developed no intrusive /d/.
- c. In a number of words, ME developed an intrusive /t/ after /s/ in the same positions in which intrusive /b/ and /d/ appeared. Thus we find, for example, ME *listnen* ‘listen’ (OE *hlȳsnan*), ME *hustle* (from Middle Dutch *husselen*), and ME *beheste* (OE *behæts*). But no intrusive /t/ appears in similar words such as ME *vessel* (from Old French *vessel*), *lessen* (from the adjective *less*), or *cros* ‘cross’ (OE *cros*).

Despite the many adjustments in the distribution of consonants during the Middle English period, several combinations remained that have since simplified. The initial stops of the clusters *gn-* and *kn-* were still pronounced in ME: OE *gnæt* and *gnagan*, ME *gnat* and *gnaue(n)*; OE *cnāwan* and *cnafa*, ME *knowe(n)* and *knave*. Also, the fricative /h/ could still appear in positions other than at the beginning of a syllable; *þought* ‘thought’ was pronounced [θoxt] and *high* was [hiç]. On the other hand, /h/ was often lost in unstressed positions: OE *hit*, ME *it*.

Vowels

The vowels of English have always been less stable than its consonants. The problem of ascertaining exactly what the vowel phonemes were at a given period is exacerbated by the fact that, throughout its history, the English writing system has suffered from a paucity of graphemes (letters) to represent its rich inventory of vowel phonemes. For example, a typical PDE American dialect has fourteen vowels and diphthongs but only seven graphemes to spell them—including ⟨w⟩ and ⟨y⟩, both of which double as consonants and are restricted in their use as vowel symbols. Because we must rely heavily on written evidence in reconstructing the phonology of earlier stages of the language, our conclusions about vowel phonemes are necessarily much more

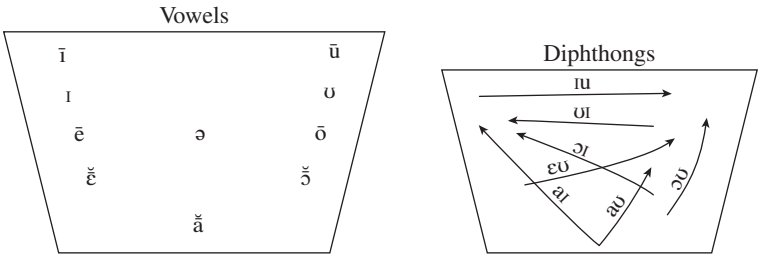


FIGURE 6.2 Middle English Consonants

tentative than our statements about consonants. The system presented in Figure 6.2 for London English during the Middle English period will thus not agree in all details with that postulated by some other scholars.

Qualitative Changes from OE to ME Table 6.2 presents the regular development of the vowels that Middle English inherited from Old English.

As Table 6.2 shows, the majority of OE vowels remained unchanged in ME, at least with respect to their regular development. Changes did occur, however, in eight of the eighteen OE vowels and diphthongs.

- 1. OE /y/ and /ȳ/ had unrounded to /ɪ/ and /ī/ in some dialects during the OE period. In the West Midlands, they remained as rounded vowels, spelled *u*, until late in the ME period. In the South, they had unrounded to /ε/ and /ē/, respectively, during OE and remained thus during ME. By the end of ME, all dialects had /ɪ/ and /ī/.
- 2. OE /æ/ apparently had lowered to /a/ in all dialects by the end of ME. However, its development is somewhat obscured by the fact that the graphic symbol ⟨æ⟩ was abandoned early in ME; to what extent the grapheme ⟨a⟩ represented both /æ/ and /a/ is uncertain. In the South, OE /æ/ apparently was /ε/, not /a/, during the ME period.

TABLE 6.2 Middle English Development of Old English Vowels

Short Vowels		Long Vowels		Diphthongs	
OE	ME*	OE	ME	OE	ME
ɪ	> ɪ	ī	> ī	eə	> ε
y	> ɪ	ȳ	> ī	æə	> a
e	> ε	ē	> ē	ēə	> ē
æ	> a	ǣ	> ē, ē	ǣə	> ē
a	> a	ā	> ā		
o	> ɔ	ō	> ō		
u	> ʊ	ū	> ū		

* We assume, though without direct evidence, that the short vowels had a lax pronunciation, similar to that of PDE, by the end of ME.

3. In Figure 5.7 we show only one symbol for /æ/ in West Saxon Old English. However, other OE dialects had had two different phonemes here, reflecting two different origins. One of them, /æ/¹, came from West Germanic *ā and had become /ē/ in OE dialects other than West Saxon; this /ē/ remained in ME. The second, /æ/², arose from the *i*-umlaut (mutation) of OE /ā/. This /æ/² had become /ē/ in most of England by ME times.
4. OE /ā/ became ME /ō/ during the course of ME in all areas except the North, where it remained /ā/ throughout the ME period.
5. The OE diphthongs /ē̃ə/ and /æ̃ə/ smoothed (became pure vowels) in Middle English.

If only the regular developments just outlined had occurred, the Middle English vowel system would have been rather simple, simpler in fact than that of Old English, with only five short and six long vowels: /ɪ, ɛ, a, ɔ, u/ and /ī, ē, ē̄, ō, ū/. But the total picture is more complex because various phonological developments added the short vowel /ə/ and the long vowel /ā/ to the ME inventory. Other sound changes and French loanwords added as many as seven new diphthongs to the language.

Short Vowels The ME midcentral short vowel /ə/ appeared only in unstressed syllables. Beginning in OE and continuing in ME, the short vowels /a/, /ɛ/, /ɔ/, and /u/ all reduced to /ə/ (most often spelled *e*) in unstressed syllables. Under the same circumstances, the short vowel /ɪ/ tended to remain, as it does to the present day. This reduction of all unstressed vowels to /ə/ or /ɪ/ was one factor in the ultimate loss of most English inflections.

A minor source of ME /ə/ was the development of a “parasitic” vowel (also called an **epenthetic** vowel) between two consonants. This parasitic vowel was spelled various ways, most commonly *e*.

OE	ME
<i>setl</i>	<i>setel</i> ‘seat’
<i>æfre</i>	<i>ever</i>
<i>swefn</i>	<i>sweven</i> ‘dream’

In addition to the OE sources for the ME short vowels were loanwords from Old Norse and Old French. For example, the Old Norse loans *skin* and *egg* had /ɪ/ and /ɛ/, respectively. The Old French loans *test* and *part* had /ɛ/ and /a/, respectively.

Long Vowels The ME long vowel system differed from that of OE in its loss of /ȳ/ and /ǣ/ and its addition of /ē/ and /ō/. Note also that the OE combination of [uɣ] and [ūɣ] had completely vocalized by ME, giving ME /ū/. Loanwords also contributed to the ME long vowels; for instance, the ON loans *root* with /ō/ and *thrive* with /ī/, and the OF loan *beste* ‘beast’ with /ē/.

As Table 6.2 shows, OE /ā/ became /ɔ̄/ in ME, but /ā/ remained among the ME vowels; it had two sources, one within English itself and one in loanwords. The first came from the lengthening of (short) /a/ and /æ/ in open syllables (see “Quantitative Changes” below). For instance, OE *bapian* became ME *bāthe*, and OE *blāse* became ME *blāse* ‘blaze’. The second source was French loanwords with /a/, e.g., OF *save*, ME *save*.

Diphthongs Although all the OE diphthongs smoothed to pure vowels in Middle English, an assortment of new diphthongs arose, most of them as the result of vocalization of OE /w/, /j/, and /v/ between two vowels. In addition, French loanwords provided two other diphthongs, /ɔɪ/ and /ɔɪ/. They later fell together as /ɔɪ/ in most dialects of English, but some dialects of English distinguish them to this day. That is, those dialects that have /paɪzən/ for *poison* and /baɪl/ for *boil* have only the standard /nɔɪz/ for *noise* and /jɔɪ/ for *joy*; the distinction dates from Middle English. The diphthongs /ɪu/ and /ɛu/ were rare even in Middle English; they later fell together and appear in PDE as either /u/ or /ju/. The specific sources of the new diphthongs are as follows.

1. ME /ɪu/ developed from OE [īw] and [ēaw], e.g., OE *spīwan*, ME *spewe(n)* ‘spew’; OE *trēowe*, ME *trewe* ‘true’.
2. ME /ɛu/ developed from OE [āw] and [āaw], e.g., OE *fēawe*, ME *fewe* ‘few’; a second source was Old French loanwords, as in OF *neveu*, ME *neveu* ‘nephew’.
3. ME /aʊ/ developed from OE /aw/, /aɣ/, and /ax/, e.g., OE *clawu*, ME *clawe* ‘claw’; OE *awiht*, ME *ught*. Another source was Old French loanwords such as OF *cause*, ME *cause*.
4. ME /ɔʊ/ developed from OE /āw/, /āɣ/, and /āx/, as well as from OE /ōw/, /ōɣ/, and /ōx/. Examples include OE *boga*, ME *bowe* ‘bow’; OE *blōwan*, ME *blowe*; OE *dohtor*, ME *doughter* ‘daughter’.
5. ME /aɪ/ developed from OE /æj/, /ej/, /ej/, and /ææx/, e.g., OE *dæg*, ME *dai* ‘day’; OE *weg*, ME *wey* ‘way’.
6. ME /ɔɪ/ appeared in loanwords from Old French, e.g., OF *bouillir*, ME *boille(n)* ‘boil’; OF *point*, ME *point*.
7. ME /ɔɪ/ appeared in loanwords from Old French, e.g., OF *noyse*, ME *noise*; OF *choisir*, ME *chois* ‘choice’.

W 6.4

Quantitative Changes from OE to ME For the later history of English, the quantitative changes in vowels during ME were of greater importance than the qualitative. Phonemic vowel length was retained throughout ME, but, as it became more and more predictable and redundant, its overall importance was greatly reduced. These quantitative changes paved the way for the ultimate loss of quantitative distinctions between vowels in Early Modern English.

Lengthening of Short Vowels As early as Old English, short vowels had lengthened before certain consonant clusters, that is, liquids or nasals followed by

a homorganic (made in the same part of the mouth) voiced stop, or /r/ followed by /s/, /ð/, or /l/. Examples are early OE *climban*, ME *clīmbe*; OE *fēld*, ME *fēld* ‘field’. This lengthening did not take place in words that rarely received full stress in a syllable (for example, *and* or *under*). Nor did it occur if a third consonant followed the cluster (OE *cild*, ME *chīld*, but plural OE *cildru*, ME *childrene*).

With some variation among dialects, these OE lengthenings shortened again during the fourteenth century, *except* for the following combinations.

i, o + mb	early OE <i>climban</i> /climbən/; ME <i>clīmbe(n)</i> /clīmbən/ ‘climb’ (but OE <i>dumb</i> /dumb/, ME <i>dumb</i> where <i>u</i> precedes <i>mb</i>)
i, u + nd	early OE <i>grindan</i> /grindən/; ME <i>grīnde(n)</i> /grīndən/ ‘grind’ (but OE <i>scrinan</i> /šrinkən/, ME <i>shrince(n)</i> /šrinkən/ ‘shrink’ where <i>nk</i> follows a vowel)
any vowel + ld	early OE <i>milde</i> /mildə/; ME <i>mīlde</i> /mīldə/ early OE <i>weald</i> /wēald/; ME <i>wēld</i> ‘forest’ /wēld/ (The ME form shows the regular development of the OE long diphthong <i>ēa</i> .)

During the thirteenth century, the short vowels /a/, /ε/, and /ɔ/ lengthened in open syllables. (An open syllable is one ending in a vowel.) Thus

OE <i>gatu</i> /gatu/	ME <i>gā-te</i> /gātə/ ‘gate’
OE <i>stelan</i> /stelən/	ME <i>stēle(n)</i> /stēlən/ ‘steal’
OE <i>hopa</i> /hopə/	ME <i>hōpe</i> /hōpə/ ‘hope’

Later in the thirteenth century, /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ sometimes also lengthened in open syllables but with a simultaneous lowering of the vowel. Hence /ɪ/ became /ē/ and /ʊ/ became /ō/. This lengthening, however, was only sporadic and fails to appear in many words.

OE <i>pise</i> /pɪsə/, ME <i>pēse</i> /pēsə/ ‘peas’ (but not in OE <i>ficol</i> , ME <i>fikel</i> ‘fickle’)
OE <i>wudu</i> /wʊdu/, ME <i>wōde</i> /wōdə/ ‘wood’ (but not in OE <i>hulu</i> , ME <i>hule</i> ‘hull’)

Shortening of Long Vowels Beginning as early as the tenth century, there was a parallel shortening of long vowels in stressed closed syllables. (A closed syllable is one ending in one or more consonants.)

OE <i>sōf-te</i> /sōftə/	ME <i>sof-te</i> /softə/ ‘soft’
OE <i>gōd-sibb</i> /gōdsib:/	ME <i>god-sib</i> /godsib/ ‘gossip’
OE <i>scēap-hirde</i> /šēaphirdə/	ME <i>shep-herde</i> /šepherdə/ ‘shepherd’

Shortening did not always occur before *-st*. Thus, beside the predicted ME *last* ‘track, last’ from OE *lāst*, we also find ME *gōst* ‘ghost’ from OE *gāst*. Beside the

expected shortening of OE *rūst* ‘rust’ to ME *rust*, there is ME *Chrīst* from OE *crist*.

If two or more unstressed syllables followed the stressed syllable, the vowel of the stressed syllable is always shortened. This rule explains the different vowels still used today in *Christ/Christmas* (ME *Chrīst/Christesmesse*) and *break/breakfast* (ME *brēke/brekefast*).

This process of conditioned lengthening and shortening of vowels depending on whether the syllable was open or closed led to different vowels in different parts of the paradigm of the same word or root. In many instances, regularization across the paradigm later took place. However, some irregularities or apparent irregularities remain to the present day. Examples include the vowels of *five/fifteen*, of *wise/wisdom*, and of the singular staff/alternative plural *staves*. In a number of weak verbs, the addition of a /t/ or /d/ in the past tense and past participle closed the preceding syllable, leading to such irregularities as those below.

PDE	ME
hide: hid	<i>hī-de(n): hid-de</i>
keep: kept	<i>kē-pe(n): kep-te</i>
sleep: slept	<i>slē-pe(n): slep-te</i>
hear: heard	<i>hē-re(n): her-de</i>

Loss of Unstressed Vowels During the course of Middle English, unstressed final *-e* (pronounced /ə/) was dropped, although, to judge from the scansion of poetry, its pronunciation remained optional throughout the period. For example:

PDE	OE	Early ME	Late ME
heart	<i>heorte</i> /heortə/	<i>herte</i> /hertə/	/hert/
mild	<i>milde</i> /mildə/	<i>milde</i> /mīldə/	/mīld/
immediately	<i>sōna</i> /sōnə/	<i>sone</i> /sōnə/	/sōn/
strength	<i>strengþu</i> /strengðu/	<i>strengthe</i> /strēnkθə/	/strēnkθ/

By the end of Middle English, the unstressed *-e* of inflectional endings was also being lost, even when it was followed by a consonant. Thus, although the *e* was still usually written in the plural ending *-es*, the third-person singular present endings *-es* and *-eth*, it was no longer pronounced (except in the environments where it is still pronounced today, such as in *wishes*, *judges*, *wanted*, *raided*).

In addition to its drastic consequences for the inflectional system of English (see “Middle English Morphology”), this reduction and then loss of unstressed final vowels eliminated the phonological distinctions among many adjectives and adverbs. For a number of common words, the only distinction in Old English between adjective and adverb had been a final *-e* on the adverb. Compare PDE ‘deep’ (OE *dēop* /dēop/) with its adverb form ‘deeply,’ *dēope* /dēopə/. The adjective ‘hard’ (OE *heard* /heārd/) became the adverb *hearde* /heārdə/. The

loss of the *-e* of the adverb in ME made adjective and adverb identical and is the origin of the so-called plain adverbs such as *hard* and *fast* today—although many adverbs have since acquired an *-ly* that distinguishes them from their corresponding adjectives. (Think of the PDE uncertainty between such phrases as *Drive slow* and *Drive slowly*.)

The final *-e* of most French loanwords was not lost in this general decay of the final *-e*. These vowels remained because, during ME, most such loans still retained the French stress on the final syllable, even though the stress was to move back toward the beginning of the word over the coming centuries. Thus ME *cite* ‘city’ and *purete* ‘purity’ still have final vowels in Present-Day English.

Prosody

Despite the many changes in the phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary between Old English and Middle English, the stress patterns (prosody) of native English words changed little; indeed, they remain much the same today. Major stress was on root syllables, while subsequent syllables received minimal stress. Compound words usually had a major stress on the first element and a secondary stress on the second element.

However, the ratio of stressed to unstressed syllables in the sentence as a whole was affected by several factors during Middle English. The loss of many inflectional endings led to a reduction in the number of unstressed syllables. This loss was counterbalanced by an increased use of unstressed particles. Among these were the emerging obligatory definite and indefinite articles; a wider array of prepositions (some of which consisted of two or even more syllables); an increased number of subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns; the analytic possessive (genitive) with *of*; the marked infinitive with a preceding unstressed *to*, *for to*, or *at*; and compound verb phrases of which only the main verb received full stress.

In addition, among the great influx of French loanwords were many with two, three, or more syllables, of which only one syllable in each word received major stress. Newly borrowed loans of this sort normally were stressed on the final syllable in accordance with French patterns, though there was a general tendency over the years for the stress to migrate toward the front of the word.

The net result of all these changes was a shift in the perceived rhythm of the language. Old English had had what might be termed a generally trochaic rhythm. Words and phrases tended to begin with a stressed syllable and end with unstressed syllables (inflectional endings): *ópřě sípě* ‘on another occasion’; *fěľă mǐssěřă* ‘for many half-years’; *fólcě to frófřě* ‘as a consolation to the people’; *hěľěp wáfěďdōn* ‘the men marveled’. By late Middle English, the rhythm had shifted to a more iambic pattern of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables. French loans contributed to this shift, of course, but the wider use of particles was just as important because so many of them formed a unit with a following stressed word: *őf mǔ gráce*, *fōr tō fýnde*, *tō the péplēs*, *shōľde hăň lōst hīs hēed*, *whăň the sōnne wăś tō řéte*.

The Medieval Scribe

The conventional image of the medieval scribe is that of an anonymous, dedicated, cloistered monk hunched over his writing table in a cold and dark cell. However, if we can judge from surviving drawings, a scribe more often sat upright before a steeply sloping writing desk in a relatively well-lit room. Nor were all scribes monks or other clerics. From early in the medieval period, there is ample evidence of commercial scribes, some of whom worked independently, others of whom were employees of a stationer's firm. Some worked part-time to earn extra money, perhaps moonlighting from a poorly paid job of another kind. The earliest known surviving English public advertisement is a poster illustrating specimens of script; it probably once hung outside a shop in Oxford to give passersby a chance to peruse the "wares" available within.

Far from being anonymous, many medieval scribes signed the works they copied, sometimes simply with a given name such as Iohannes, sometimes with further information about when and where they were writing. These names tell us that, perhaps contrary to our preconceptions, scribes were often women. Even the scribes' dedication to their work can be questioned: A number of the signatures include statements about the scribes' delight at being done with their work or their low opinion of the piece they had just copied—usually because it was too long and too boring. One scribe clearly had something other than literature on his mind when he finished his manuscript with the rhyming couplet *Explicit hoc totum; pro Christo da mihi potem*. ('It's all done. For Christ's sake give me a drink!').

SOURCE: Some of the information given here is from Christopher de Hamel, *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators* (Toronto Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992).

Middle English Graphics

During the Middle English period, spelling and handwriting styles varied greatly over time, in different areas of the country, and even within the work of a single scribe. Even the total inventory of graphemes (letters) occasionally differed; for example, Scots English often used the symbol β where other areas had a final *-s* or *-ss*. To some extent, these differences reflect dialectal differences, but in many cases they are simply the predictable inconsistencies of a written language that is not the official language of the nation and hence not standardized. As English gradually replaced French as the official language, as the London dialect became accepted as a national standard, and especially with the advent of printing at the end of the ME period, graphic consistency began to appear, though it was not to become absolute until well into the Early Modern English period. Because of this great disorder, we can make only generalizations, focusing primarily on the most common features and those that have been retained in PDE.

The Middle English Alphabet

During most of the Middle English period and in most areas, there were usually 26 letters in the alphabet. However, as Table 6.3 illustrates, this alphabet was not identical to that of either Old English or Present-Day English. The OE symbols α and δ dropped out of use early in Middle English, but another symbol, β , was

TABLE 6.3 Comparison of ME and OE Alphabets

The Middle English Alphabet					The Old English Alphabet					
a	f	k	p	þ	a	d	ȝ(g)	m	p	p(w)
b	g	l	q	u/v	æ	ð	h	n	r	x
c	ȝ	m	r	w	b	e	i	o	s	y
d	h	n	s	x	c	f	l	u	t	þ
e	i/j	o	t	y						
				z						

retained from the OE alphabet. Further, although *j* and *v* had been introduced by the French, in writing English they were still simply allographs (variants) of *i* and *u*, respectively. That is, both *i* and *j* were used to represent both the vowels /i/ and /i:/ and the consonant /j/. *Time* might be spelled *tiim* or *tijm*, and *judge* could be spelled either *iuge* or *juge*. Likewise, both *u* and *v* represented both /u/ and /u:/ and the consonant /v/. Thus *up* might be spelled *vp* or *up*, and *even* might be *even* or *euēn*. Later in the ME period and continuing into Early Modern English, there was a strong tendency to reserve *v* for initial position (*vp*, *valeie* ‘valley’) and *u* for other positions (*euēn*, *pur* ‘pure’).

The symbol ⟨ȝ⟩ (derived from the OE form for /g/ and /j/) had a number of values in ME, the most common of which were [x], as in *þoȝt* ‘thought’ and /j/ as in *ȝung* ‘young’. Sometimes ⟨ȝ⟩ represented /j/, as in *bridȝe* ‘bridge’. Probably because scribes tended to confuse ȝ and z, ȝ also sometimes was used for /z/, especially in inflectional endings such as in *daiȝ* ‘days’.

In OE, the letter *ȝ* had represented the front rounded vowel /y/. As early as late OE, however, this vowel had unrounded in many dialects, becoming identical in sound with /i/ or /i:/. Thereafter, and continuing throughout ME, *ȝ* and *i* were used interchangeably to represent both /i/ and /i:/. (In the dialects that retained rounded high front vowels in ME, *u*—not *ȝ*—was used to represent /y/ and /ȝ:/.) Note that, although *ȝ* is still used in PDE to represent /i/ or /i:/, it is no longer interchangeable with *i*; today *ȝ* normally represents /i/, /i:/, or /aɪ/ only (a) at the end of a word (*by*, *pay*, *joy*, *party*); (b) in many loanwords ultimately of Greek origin (*system*, *lyre*, *dysentery*); and (c) in a few monosyllabic words (*dye*, *rye*, *lye*).

The letters *q* and *z* had been known in OE but were rarely used. Under French influence, their use was extended in ME. In particular, the combination *qu* was used for /kw/, replacing the OE *cw* even in native words (OE *cwic* ‘alive’, ME *quicke*; OE *cwēn* ‘queen’, ME *quene*).

During the course of ME, there was a general tendency to replace *þ* with the digraph *th* in representing /θ/ or /ð/. The process was gradual, and *þ* was still being used as late as EMnE, especially in the spelling of function words like *that*, *thou*, and *then*. However, beginning in ME, scribes often formed *þ* like *ȝ*, so that *ȝe*, for example, could represent either the second-person plural subject


pronoun *ye* or the definite article *the*. This is the origin of the pseudo-archaism *ye olde coffee shoppe*; the *ye* here would properly be pronounced like *the*.

Spelling and Punctuation

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Old English spelling had been relatively consistent, though it by no means achieved a perfect match between phonemes and graphemes. The many sound changes between OE and ME discussed earlier meant that the match between sound and symbol became even poorer. In addition, French loanwords introduced new spelling conventions to English, and these conventions often spread to native English words. The different dialectal areas frequently developed spelling conventions of their own, even for the same sounds, and these conventions had to be reconciled somehow when a standardized spelling finally did arise. Here we will concentrate on the most important spelling changes between OE and ME: single-letter substitutions and the increasing use of **digraphs** (pairs of letters used to represent a single phoneme, as in *th* to represent /θ/).

Single-Letter Changes We have already mentioned a number of spelling changes brought about by the loss of earlier graphemes or the introduction of new ones during ME. In addition, a number of substitutions were made within the existing inventory of letters. Some of them were introduced by French scribes, others apparently by English scribes.

- **o for /ʊ/.** OE had usually spelled short /ʊ/ with *u*. In ME, a number of words containing this sound came to be spelled with *o*, and many of them are still spelled this way. In most such words (such as *come*, *love*, *son*, *won*, *tongue*, *some*), the earlier *u* had preceded another grapheme also formed with minims (a minim is a single vertical stroke). In the handwriting of the time, letters formed with minims were often ambiguous because scribes were not careful, for instance, about leaving *u* open at the top and *n* open at the bottom, or about spacing between letters. Thus the word *minim* itself might appear as  (the letter *i* was not yet “dotted”). By replacing *u* with *o*, some of this ambiguity could be avoided; the word *come*, for example, would appear as *come* rather than *cume*.
- **c for /s/.** In OE, the letter *c* represented either /k/, as in *cuman* ‘to come’ or /č/, as in *cild* ‘child’. The combination *sc* represented /š/ as in *scearp* ‘sharp’, and *cg* stood for /j/ as in *hrycg* ‘ridge’. French loanwords like *cellar* and *place* introduced still another value for *c*, that of /s/, which spread to some native English words like *lice* and *mice*. (Note that the singular forms of these words are still spelled with *s*.)
- **k for /k/.** OE had known the grapheme *k* but used it sparingly; the phoneme /k/ was normally spelled *c*. However, as just noted, *c* was already overburdened in OE and took on the additional value of *s* in ME. During the ME period, the convention arose of using *k* to represent /k/ before the vowel symbols *i* and *e* and before *n*; hence the PDE spellings *keen*, *kiss*, and *knee* (OE *cēne*, *cyssan*, and *cnēow*) versus *cat*, *cool*, *cut*, *clean*, and *creep*. For some

words, this spelling convention meant that different forms of the same word were spelled with different initial letters, which, with increasing literacy, led to the loss of the association in the minds of speakers between the related forms. Few PDE speakers think of *kine* as a plural of *cow* or of *(un)kempt* as a variant past participle of *comb*.

Digraphs We have already mentioned the increasing use of the digraph *th* to represent /ð/ and /θ/ during ME. Several other digraphs became conventional during the period, most of them under French influence.

- ***ou* and *ow* for /ū/.** French influence is responsible for the spelling *ou* or *ow* for /ū/ in such loanwords as *hour* and *round*. The convention spread to native words like *how*, *thou*, *house*, *loud*, and *brown* (OE *hū*, *þū*, *hūs*, *hlūd*, *brūn*).
- **Doubling of vowels.** The OE writing system did not indicate vowel length; /god/ ‘God’ and /gōd/ ‘good’ were both spelled *god*. During ME, vowels were often doubled to indicate length. In the influential London area, which ultimately set standards for the rest of the country, only *o* and *e* were doubled, and only these doublings are permissible in English words today (*beet*, *boot*). In the North, Scots English used a following *i* to indicate length: *guid* ‘good’, *maid* ‘made’, and *rois* ‘rose’.
- ***sh* for /š/.** OE spelled /š/ with the digraph *sc*. Under French influence, *sc* was replaced by *sh* in ME: for example, OE *scamu*, ME *shame*. Depending on the area and the scribe, /š/ was also spelled *ssh*, *sch*, and *ss*, though of course *sh* ultimately became the regular spelling.
- ***ch* for /č/.** As noted above, OE spelled /č/ as *c*. Again under French influence, /č/ became spelled *ch* in ME (OE *ceap*, *cinn*; ME *cheap*, *chin*). This spelling was a useful innovation that reduced some of the ambiguity of the letter *c*.
- ***dg(e)* for /j/.** OE spelled /j/ as *cg*. In earlier ME, this spelling was replaced by *gg* and later by *dg(e)*: thus OE *bricg*, early ME *brigge*, later ME *bridge*. In OE, /j/ had not occurred initially at all. Norman French loanwords introduced the sound in initial position, and here it was spelled *i* or *j* according to French conventions (ME *just* or *iust*).
- ***gh* for [x].** In OE, the [x] allophone of /h/ was spelled *h*. The use of *gh* to represent this sound began in ME (OE *þoht* [θoxt], *riht* [rixht]; ME *thought*, *right*). In the North and particularly in Scotland, *ch* tended to be used instead of *gh*, a practice that is still reflected in the variant spellings of proper names like *McCullough*/*McCulloch*.
- ***wh* for [w].** OE had used the digraph *hw* to spell the [w] sound (phonetically a voiceless aspirated bilabial fricative): OE *hwæt* ‘what’ and *hwil* ‘while’. In ME, the order of the letters was reversed to *wh*, probably by analogy with other digraphs that had *h* as the second element. In the South, where the aspiration of such words as *what* and *while* was lost at an early date, spellings like *wat* and *wile* were typical. In the North, where the aspiration remained heavy, the spelling was often *quh* or *qu* (*quhat*, *quile*).

- **gu for /g/.** The spelling *gu* for /g/ was introduced in a number of French loanwords, such as *guard*, *guile*, and *guide*. This convention spread to some words not of French origin, such as ON *guest* and *guild*, and even to native English words like *guilt* (OE *gylt*).

Punctuation By modern standards, punctuation in ME manuscripts is sparse and limited in variety. The point (or period or stop) is the most common mark, but its use did not correspond to modern practice. More often than not, it indicated a syntactic break of some kind, but not necessarily the end of a complete sentence. The point was also used to surround Roman numerals and sometimes to follow abbreviations (as it is today).

The comma was not to appear regularly until the sixteenth century, but to some extent its function was served by the *punctus elevatus*, a kind of upside-down and backwards semicolon—though many scribes did not employ the *punctus elevatus* at all. In later ME especially, a virgule (slanted line) indicated syntactic breaks, partially corresponding to the PDE use of the comma.

In many manuscripts, no special mark was used to designate a question; in others, a point with a curved arch over it served as a question mark. To indicate the breaking of a word at the end of a line, two forms of hyphen were used. One was a long, thin oblique stroke; the other, two short parallel strokes like a tilted equals sign. Often no equivalent to the hyphen appeared at all, and the word was simply completed on the following line.

Paragraphs or subheadings were often introduced by a square bracket or a modified form of capital C (the ancestor of our paragraph symbol today).

Handwriting

After the Conquest, the distinctive, elegant, and highly legible Insular hand of Old English, introduced by Irish monks in the sixth century, was gradually replaced by the Carolingian minuscule. This originally rather angular hand later developed a more rounded cursive style (with connected letters) that was less legible but that could be written more rapidly. A more ornate “gothic” hand was often used for formal writing; sometimes the two are mixed in the same manuscript, with the gothic being used for Latin and the cursive script for English.

MIDDLE ENGLISH MORPHOLOGY

Loss of Inflectional Endings

The few major and numerous minor changes in phonology between Old English and Middle English are relatively unimportant compared to the cataclysmic changes in inflectional morphology. By the end of the ME period, English had only a handful of leftover inflections. Along with the loss of inflection came the loss of grammatical gender and its replacement by natural (or biological)

gender. Nouns were reduced to two cases (possessive and nonpossessive). Adjectives lost most of their inflections. Personal endings of verbs were reduced, and mood distinctions blurred. Personal pronouns remained relatively intact, but the distinction between dual and plural number had vanished.

There is no single, simple answer to the question why English should have renounced its Indo-European heritage and changed from a synthetic, inflecting language to an analytic language dependent on word order and particles for indicating the relationships among the words in a sentence. One of the standard explanations is that, exposed to and confused by the varying inflectional systems of three different languages (English, French, and Scandinavian), English speakers abandoned inflections entirely, in a kind of creolization of the language. This explanation is not sufficient. First, the process was well under way in English before the Conquest. French would, however, have tended to support—though not necessarily cause—inflectional loss in English because Old French itself preserved only a distinction between singular and plural. What is more, the plural ended in *-s*, the same ending that was to become universal for the plural in English. Second, Scandinavian influence was heavy only in certain areas of the country; besides, the inflectional systems of Old Norse and Old English were quite similar for many classes of nouns and adjectives (verbal inflections differed more, but English lost fewer verbal inflections than noun and adjective inflections). For example, the declension of the word for “judgment,” a strong masculine noun in both languages, was as follows.

	Singular		Plural	
	Old English	Old Norse	Old English	Old Norse
Nominative	dōm	dōmr	dōmas	dōmar
Accusative	dōm	dōm	dōmas	dōma
Genitive	dōmes	dōms	dōma	dōma
Dative	dōme	dōmi	dōmum	dōmum

In particular, Old Norse influences should have, if anything, reinforced the genitive plural *-a* and the dative plural *-um* in English, because almost all nouns of all classes and genders in both languages had these endings.

Certainly one important contributing factor to the loss of inflections in English was the phonological development described earlier in this chapter: the reduction of all unstressed final vowels to /ə/ meant that the distinctions previously signaled by *-e*, *-o-*, *-a*, and *-u* (OE /e o a u/) were all lost as all became /ə/, usually spelled *-e*.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Old English already had a more rigid word order than many other Indo-European languages. While this alone would not *cause* loss of inflections, it would tend to substitute for them. That is, the information formerly carried by inflections could be shifted to word order. Similarly, the increasing use of prepositions and other particles helped carry some of the syntactical information formerly conveyed through inflections.

In sum, while no one factor can be singled out as the sole reason for inflectional loss in Middle English, the combination of factors provides a reasonable post hoc explanation.

As a rule, the North of England, conservative with respect to phonological changes, was far more innovative with respect to morphological changes. Almost without exception, the reduction of inflections began in the North, spread to the Midlands, and slowly reached the South; in some instances, the South preserved features that had been lost centuries before in the North.

Nouns

By late Old English, the *-um* of dative endings had become *-un*. At about the same time, all the vowels of inflectional endings were reduced to /ə/, spelled *-e*. Thus *-um*, *-an*, *-on*, and *-en* all became /ən/, usually spelled *-en*. Later, this final *-n* was also lost in most, though not all, noun endings. Finally, by late Middle English, final inflectional *-e* had dropped (though it often continued to be spelled). The result was only three³ different forms for nearly all nouns—essentially the state we have in English today.

The result of all these sound changes was that case distinctions in nouns were reduced to two: possessive versus nonpossessive. Grammatical gender was lost—though this loss was due as much to changes in the demonstrative and the adjective as to changes in the noun itself, because the form of a noun even in Old English had been a poor indicator of its gender. For the most part, the OE distinctions among the several noun classes vanished, and over time, almost all nouns were generalized to the older strong masculine declension. French loanwords were also adapted to this declension; this was a simple step because French at this time already had lost most of its nominal inflectional endings but preserved a plural in *-s*. The Old English weak noun declension with oblique singular forms and nominative-accusative plurals in *-n* survived into early ME, even spreading to some formerly strong nouns in the South, but eventually coalesced with the regular strong declension. Although PDE preserves only *children*, *brethren*, and *oxen*, *-n* plurals were also common in ME for *eye*, *ear*, *shoe*, *foe*, and *hand*.

As exceptions to the general pattern of noun declensions presented in Table 6.4 ME retained a few *s*-less genitives, especially of formerly feminine nouns (*his lady grace*), and of kinship terms (*thi brother wif*; *hir doghter name*). Nouns ending in sibilant sounds like /s, z, ʒ, ʒ/ often appear without a genitive *-s* well beyond the ME period (*for peace sake* occurs as late as the eighteenth century). Some Old English strong neuter nouns had no ending in the nominative-accusative plural, and this pattern was retained for a number of them into the ME period, including such words as *year*, *thing*, *winter*, and *word*.

Among the unchanged neuter plurals of OE had been a few names of animals, such as *dēor* ‘wild animal’, *scēap* ‘sheep’, *swīn* ‘swine’, and *nēat* ‘animal’.

3. Four, if we count the possessive plural as separate from the other cases. It was and is different for mutated plurals, such as *man:man's* / *men:men's*.

TABLE 6.4 OE and ME Noun Declensions Compared

Strong Masculine: <i>hund</i> 'hound'				Weak Masculine: <i>nama</i> 'name'			
Case		OE	ME	Case		OE	ME
Sg.	N	hund	hund	Sg.	N	nama	name
	A	hund	hund		A	naman	name
	G	hundes	hundes		G	naman	names
	D	hunde	hund		D	naman	name
Pl.	NA	hundas	hundes	Pl.	NA	naman	names
	G	hunda	hundes		G	namena	names
	D	hundum	hundes		D	namum	names

Sg. = singular; Pl. = plural; N = nominative; A = accusative; G = genitive; D = dative; NA = nominative-accusative

During and beyond ME, this pattern of unmarked plurals for animal names spread by analogy to other words that formerly had belonged to different declensions (*fish*, *elk*). Ultimately, the subgroup was to become so well-defined that it even attracted to itself loanwords from outside English, including the Portuguese *buffalo* and the Algonquian *moose*.

In ME and even later, measure words like *mile*, *pound*, *fathom*, *pair*, *score*, *thousand*, and *stone* frequently appeared without a pluralizing *-s*, especially after numerals. This practice may have resulted from analogy with the *s*-less plurals of *year* and *winter* in OE. Or such unchanged plurals could be a reflex of former genitive plurals in *-a*; OE used the genitive plural after numerals. Whatever the origin, the practice was common in ME, and it survives dialectally down to the present day. In attributive position as adjectives, such combinations are part of the standard language in PDE (*I took a two-hour walk* versus *I walked for two hours*).

Finally, the OE class of mutated plurals (words that signaled plural number by a vowel change rather than by an ending) was preserved fairly well in Middle English; again, most of them survive to the present day. Examples include *geese*, *teeth*, *lice*, and *kine* (the older plural of *cow*).

Adjectives

Of all the parts of speech, the adjective suffered the greatest inflectional losses in Middle English. Although it was the most highly inflected part of speech in Old English, it became totally uninflected by the end of the ME period. Because its case and gender depended on that of the noun it modified, it quite predictably lost case and gender distinctions when the noun lost them, failing to preserve even the possessive endings that the noun retained.

The distinction between strong (indefinite) and weak (definite) adjectives was often blurred even in Old English usage. By Middle English, it had vanished entirely except for monosyllabic adjectives ending in a consonant. Here a final *-e*

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distinguished the strong singular form from the weak singular and from the plural.

	Strong	Weak
Singular	blind	blinde
Plural	blinde	blinde

Even this vestigial distinction was frequently not observed: forms without a final *-e* appear where a weak ending would be expected, and, conversely, *-e* appears where a strong ending would be expected.

The reduction and eventual loss of unstressed endings was the chief cause of the loss of the strong-weak distinction. Another contributing factor was surely the rising use of definite and indefinite articles, which conveyed much of the information formerly carried by the adjective endings.

The distinction between singular and plural adjectives generally lasted until the unstressed final *-e* was dropped in pronunciation, though it was retained in spelling long after it had been lost in speech.

One might reasonably expect French influence to have helped preserve the singular-plural distinction in ME adjectives. However, the French plural ending was *-s*, and no OE plural adjectives had ended in *-s*, so the French forms would not have reinforced the original English forms. Adjectives borrowed from French frequently do appear with an *-s* in the plural, but normally only when the adjective follows the noun. Thus the *-s* is more a marker of an un-English word order than of plurality. For example, in Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, we find phrases like *houres inequales* and *plages principalis* ('principal regions'); the plural adjective may even modify a native English noun, as in *sterres fixes* ('fixed stars') and *dayes naturales*. But when the adjective precedes the noun, it has no *-s*; *dyverse langages*, *celestialle bodies*, *principale divisiouns*. For the last example, note that *principale* appears without an *-s* even though it has an *-s* when it follows the noun in *plages principalis*.

The comparative and superlative forms of adjectives (and adverbs) developed predictably and undramatically in ME. The OE comparative suffix *-ra* became ME *-re* and later, by metathesis, *-er*. The OE superlative endings *-ost* and *-est* became *-est*. Several common adjectives in OE had had *i*-mutation in their comparative and superlative forms. Analogy was eventually to level all of these (except the variant *elder* from *old*) under the base form, but a number still survived in ME, often beside the "regular" analogical comparatives. For instance, ME texts show both *longer* and *lenger* from *long* and both *strongest* and *strengest* from *strong*.

The PDE system of periphrastic comparison (separate words instead of inflectional endings) had its beginnings in ME, but the complexities of the present system were not settled until the modern period. After the fourteenth century, *ma* ('more'), *more*, and *most* often appear either along with the *-er* and *-est* inflections or as a substitute for them. Hence we find *swetter* 'sweeter', *more swete*, and even *more swetter*. Double comparison of the type *more swetter* and *moste clennest* is so common that *more* and *most* are perhaps better regarded here as intensifiers

(analogous to PDE *awfully nice*, *real tired*) than as comparative markers. Again, although French influence cannot be called the sole cause of the development of the periphrastic comparative in ME, it was probably a contributing factor—French by this time was using only periphrastic comparatives.

Old English adjectives were frequently used as nouns. This practice continued in ME, probably supported by the parallel practice in French. However, the use of the pronoun *one* to “support” the adjective also began during this period. Thus we find such phrases as *hwon þe sunfule is iturnd* ‘when the sinful (one) has turned’ and *this olde greye, Humble in his speche* ‘this old gray-haired (person), humble in his speech’, but also, as time goes on, phrases like *I have the mooste stedefast wyf, And eek the mekeste oon that bereth lyf* ‘I have the most steadfast wife, and also the meekest one alive’. Even long after the development of the pro-word *one*, the use of an adjective alone as a noun continued down to almost the modern period.

Pronouns

Personal Pronouns If the Old English personal pronouns had developed regularly in Middle English, much of the differentiation between gender and number would have been lost. In particular, the forms for “he” and “she” would have become identical, resulting in *he* (/he/ in ME and /hi/ in PDE). The explanation for the preservation of gender is not clear; after all, even OE had had no gender distinction in the plural personal pronouns, and gender was lost for nouns, adjectives, and other pronouns during ME. Nor can one argue that gender distinction in the third-person singular are essential to any language—Chinese, for example, makes no gender distinction in speech and developed a distinction in writing in the twentieth century and only as a result of Western influence. Nevertheless, for whatever reason, English has retained gender in the third-person singular pronouns, though not without a great deal of confusion and variation during the entire ME period and some unexplained sound changes.

Throughout the ME period and up to the present day, English personal pronouns have preserved all their original inflectional categories of number, gender, case, and person. During ME, one case was lost through the coalescence of dative and accusative into a single object case. In addition, the dual number, weak even in OE, disappeared. All other OE inflectional distinctions were preserved in one way or another.

All this is not to say that the morphological changes in the pronominal system were minor. First, although gender survived, it became natural (or biological) gender instead of grammatical gender. That is, the pronoun selected to substitute for a noun depended on the sex of the referent and not on the arbitrary and inherent gender of the noun used to indicate the referent. Some use of natural gender had appeared as early as OE; conversely, the conservative Southern dialects preserved some grammatical gender until well into the fourteenth century.

Further, the number distinction between singular and plural in the second-person pronouns, based solely on actual number in OE, shifted gradually to a more sociologically based number in ME. When addressing more than one

TABLE 6.5 Middle English Personal Pronouns

Case	First-Person Singular		First-Person Plural	
Subject	ich, I		we	
Object	me		us	
Possessive	min(e), mi		ure, our	
Case	Second-Person Singular		Second-Person Plural	
Subject	þu, thou, etc.		3e, ye	
Object	þe, thee, etc.		3ou, eu, you, 3iu, etc.	
Possessive	þin(e), þi, thin(e), etc.		3ur(e), your(e), etc.	
Case	3d Sg. Masc.	3d Sg. Fem.	3d Sg. Neut.	3d Plural
Subject	he	heo, sche, ho, he, 3ho, etc.	hit, it	he, hi, þei, ho, hie, þai, etc.
Object	him	hire, hure, her, heore, etc.	hit, it, him	hem, þem, ham, heom, þaim, þam, etc.
Possessive	his	hir(e), heore, her(e), etc.	his	here, þair, heore, hore, þar, etc.

person, the speaker always used the plural form. But from the thirteenth century on, plural forms were also increasingly used as polite or respectful forms in addressing only one person. This use of the plural as a singular originated under French influence and probably was more common in writing than in speech. It was more carefully observed among the upper classes than the lower. Nonetheless, it remained a feature of English until the singular forms were completely replaced by the plural in the eighteenth century.

Table 6.5 presents a summary of the ME personal pronoun system, including some of the most frequent variant forms.

- **First-person singular.** In accordance with the general rule that unstressed final /c/ was lost in ME, the subject pronoun became simply /I/; it was later restressed and lengthened to /ī/. ME *me* is the regular development of OE dative *me*; like all other accusative forms except the neuter pronoun, the OE accusative gave way to the dative, resulting in a single object case. ME *mīn(e)* is also the expected development of OE *mīn*. During the course of ME, the form *mi* began to be used before words beginning with a consonant, while *min* appeared before words beginning with a vowel. (Compare the use of *a* and *an* in PDE.)
- **First-person plural.** Both *we* and *us* are regular developments from OE *we* and *us*, with *us* absorbing the functions of both the earlier accusative and dative cases. Absolute pronominal forms (*ours* and also *hers*, *yours*, and *theirs*) began in the North during the ME period and gradually spread south.

- **Second-person singular.** Despite some variation in spelling during ME, second-person singular pronouns developed regularly and undramatically in ME. The /θ/ of the subject form often became /t/ when the pronoun followed a verb; thus *wiltou* ‘wilt thou’ instead of *wilt þou*, or *seiste* ‘sayest thou’ for *seist þou*.
- **Second-person plural.** The ME object form reflects a shift in the stress of the diphthong in OE dative *eow*. The subject and object forms are still distinct (unlike PDE *you*), but *ye* sometimes appears as the spelling for the unstressed object *you*, probably pronounced /jə/.
- **Third-person singular masculine.** All of the OE forms developed predictably and regularly in ME.
- **Third-person singular feminine.** The object and possessive forms of ME are predictable. However, the subject form varied widely from area to area and over time during the course of ME. The East Midlands and the North acquired forms beginning with /ʃ/; their origins are obscure and the subject of much controversy. Suffice it to say that the /ʃ/ form allowed the feminine pronoun to be distinguished from the masculine and, of course, this form was to prevail in the standard language. Nevertheless, *h*-forms remained in the South throughout the ME period.
- **Third-person singular neuter.** The initial /h/ of OE *hit* was lost in some areas as early as the twelfth century, and *it* was regular by the end of the ME period, although *hit* survived in dialects much longer. For most of the period, the OE dative *him* survived for indirect objects, while *it* (or *hit*) was used for direct objects or objects of prepositions. In accordance with the rule that accusative forms gave way to dative forms, one would expect the object form of the neuter pronoun eventually to have become *him*. However, if this had occurred, the object forms of the masculine and the neuter would have been identical; with the choice of the accusative form of the neuter, the two genders were kept distinct.
- **Third-person plural.** If the third-person plural personal pronoun had developed regularly in ME, all of its forms would have been subject to confusion with other, singular pronoun forms—the subject and possessive forms with the feminine forms, and the object form with the masculine object form. By the end of the ME period, this ambiguity had been resolved by an unusual means, borrowing the pronouns from another language, Old Norse (Scandinavian). Unlike Old English, Old Norse distinguished gender in the plural; ME borrowed the masculine forms of the Norse plural pronoun. The Old Norse subject form was *þeir*, the dative form *þeim*, and the possessive form *þeira*. All of these forms were easily adaptable to English. For the subject form, English simply dropped the final *-r*, a process that was familiar from the many Norse loanwords in English whose nominative singular and plural endings had also been in *-r* (for example, English *flat* and *leg* from ON *flatr* and *leggr*). With *þeim*, the diphthong was ultimately smoothed to a pure vowel, and with *þeira* the unstressed final *-a* was predictably dropped.

All of the new forms with /θ/ first appeared in the Northeast Midlands and North and gradually spread to the West and South. The nominative *þei* was the first to appear everywhere; for example, Chaucer has *they*, but *here* and *hem* in the oblique (non-nominative) cases, and *them* did not appear in London English until the fifteenth century. The Southern areas preserved all the native forms in *h-* until the fifteenth century.

Demonstrative Pronouns The two OE demonstrative pronouns had been highly inflected (two numbers, three genders, and five cases), but by the end of the ME period, only one singular and one plural form remained for each. At the same time, morphological fission took place as a separate, indeclinable definite article (*the*) developed, splitting off from the true demonstratives.

For both demonstratives, the new singular was based on the OE neuter nominative-accusative singular (*þæt* and *þis*), but the plural forms of both developed somewhat irregularly. At first, the plural of *that* was *tho*, the expected development of OE *þa*. Late in the ME period, an *-s* was added by analogy with the other plurals in *-s*; however, the plural *tho* survived alongside *thos(e)* until the EMnE period. If it had developed regularly, the OE plural of *this* would have become identical to the plural of *that*. Instead, a new plural, *þise*, originally with the vowel of the singular, arose.

Indeclinable *þe* (*the*) was at first only a substitute for OE *se* and *seo*, the masculine and feminine nominative singular forms of *that*. (*Se* and *seo* were the only OE demonstrative forms that did not begin with /θ/, so were vulnerable to such analogical change.) The more conservative areas of the West and South preserved inflected forms well into the ME period, but the East and North were using *þe* as an indeclinable definite article separate from the demonstrative as early as the twelfth century.

In sum, by the end of the ME period, the modern system of two demonstratives inflected only for number (*this/these* and *that/those*) and a single indeclinable definite article (*the*) was firmly established for English.

Interrogative Pronouns Even in Old English, there was no distinction between masculine and feminine gender in the interrogative pronouns, nor was there a singular-plural distinction. In Middle English, the accusative predictably fell together with the dative. The OE instrumental *hwý* was separated from the pronoun declension to become the interrogative adverb *why*. All of the forms except *what* show some irregularities in their phonological development in ME, the most striking being the loss of the /w/ in *who* (and *whom* and *whose*) when it was assimilated to the following back vowel. See Table 6.6.

As in OE and in PDE, ME *which* was also used as an interrogative pronoun. *Whether*, used only as a conjunction in PDE, could still be used as an interrogative pronoun meaning “which of two” in ME: *Mid hweper wult tu þolien?* ‘With which of the two will you suffer?’

Other Pronouns Old English had used the particle *þe*, alone or in combination with demonstrative pronouns, as a relative pronoun; less often, *þæt* ‘that’ was

TABLE 6.6 Me Interrogative Pronouns

Case	Masculine-Feminine	Neuter
Subject	who	what
Object	whom	what (acc.); whom (dat.)
Possessive	whos	whos

acc. = accusative, dat. = dative

used as a relative. During Middle English, indeclinable *þat* completely supplanted *þe* and became the most common all-purpose relative pronoun, used for all numbers, cases, and genders. (In the North and in Scots English, *at*, a borrowing from Old Norse, appeared alongside *þat* as a relative.) By the fourteenth century, however, the interrogative pronouns were beginning to be used as relatives, possibly under the influence of French and Latin usage. *Which* was the most frequent interrogative used relatively, and it was employed with both human and nonhuman referents. *Which* also appeared in such compound relatives as *which that*, *which as*, *the which*, and *the which that*. Although *who* was occasionally also used as a relative, it was rare throughout the ME period.

Omission of the relative pronoun (as in *the tree [that] she climbed*) did not occur in Old English. By the fourteenth century, however, nonexpression of the relative pronoun was fairly common, especially when the relative would have been the subject of the subordinate clause. For example, Chaucer has *he sente after a cherle was in the town* ‘he sent for a fellow (who) was in the town’. Nonexpression of a relative that would have been an object is less frequent in ME, but does occur: *the sorowe I suffred* ‘the sorrow (that) I suffered’.

Old English had no reflexive pronouns as such, simply using the dative or accusative forms of the personal pronouns as reflexives. OE *sylf* ‘self’ was not a true reflexive but an emphatic pronoun or pronominal adjective. The regular personal pronouns continued to be used as reflexives throughout ME (and beyond), but reflexives with *-self* also began to appear. Apparently because *self* was often regarded as a noun, the personal pronouns that appeared with it often—but not always—were in the possessive case. This confusion over the role of *self* is the origin of the inconsistency in form of the reflexive pronouns today; *myself* and *yourself* have the possessive form of the pronoun, but *himself* and *themselves* have the object form.

Old English had regularly used *man* as an indefinite pronoun (roughly equivalent to *one* in PDE). This use continued into ME but gradually declined, though no completely satisfactory substitute for it has ever been found. The second-person plural *you* (or *ye*) appeared as an indefinite by early ME; *one* and *they* as indefinite pronouns first appeared toward the end of ME.

Verbs

Despite many changes within the verbal system between OE and ME, ME retained, at least to some extent, all the earlier categories of tense, mood, number, and person. It also preserved the three basic types of verbs (strong, weak, and other) and

actually added what might be considered a new type of verb, the two-part or separable verb (*pick up*, *take over*). Finally, ME saw the real beginning of the complex system of phrasal verb phrases that characterizes PDE.

Strong Verbs The biggest casualties, proportionally, occurred among the strong verbs in ME. Strong verbs were particularly vulnerable because although they included the most frequently used verbs in the language, there were many more weak verbs than strong verbs, even in Old English. Second, the strong verbs were fragmented into seven different classes, with numerous irregularities. Third, sound changes had blurred or eliminated some of the distinctions within and between classes. Fourth, many OE verbs had appeared in pairs consisting of a strong verb and a parallel weak verb derived from it and similar to it in form and meaning (for example, OE *cwelan* ‘to die’ and *cwellan* ‘to kill’; *hweofan* and *hwierfan* ‘to turn’; *fēran* ‘to travel’ and *ferian* ‘to transport’). In ME, these separate but related verbs tended to fall together as a single weak verb. Finally, the many new verbs from French almost always entered English as weak verbs, thus strengthening the class of weak verbs at the expense of strong verbs. The loss of a strong verb was not, however, sudden; often the strong and weak versions coexisted for centuries; one might compare the PDE situation with *show*, which has the strong past participle *shown* beside the equally acceptable weak participle *showed*.

Despite heavy attrition, the seven classes (see Table 6.7) of strong verbs remained throughout ME, even though every class suffered some casualties, either through outright loss or through change to a weak verb. Class I, still relatively healthy in PDE, preserved its identity well, but among the losses were OE *blīcan* ‘shine’ and *līþan* ‘sail’. Class II suffered greater damage, partly because sound changes had destroyed some of the earlier vowel distinctions. *Nēotan* ‘use’ and *tēon* ‘draw’ were lost, while *flēon* ‘flee’ and *cēowan* ‘chew’ became weak. Class III, a large class in OE,

TABLE 6.7 ME Strong Verb Classes

Ablaut Series	Infinitive	3d Sg. Pres.	3d Sg. Pret.	Pl. Pret.	Past Part.
Class 1 /i-ɔ-1-1/	rise(n) ‘rise’	riseþ	ros	risen	(y)risen
Class 2 /ē-ē-ū-ū/	crepe(n) ‘creep’	crepeþ	crep	crupen	(y)crophen
Class 3 /1-a-ū-ū/	singe(n) ‘sing’	singeþ	sang	sungen	(y)sungen
Class 4 /ē-a-ē-ū/	bere(n) ‘bear’	bereþ	bar	beren	(y)boren
Class 5 /ē-a-ē-ē/	speke(n) ‘speak’	spekeþ	spak	speken	(y)speken
Class 6 /ā-ō-ō-ā/	wake(n) ‘wake’	wakeþ	wok	woken	(y)waken
Class 7 /V-ē-ē-V/	falle(n) ‘fall’	falleþ	fel	fellen	(y)fallen

also had heavy losses in ME, though the subclass of verbs with a nasal (*n* or *m*) plus another consonant remains strong to the present day. Totally lost in ME were *limpan* ‘become’ and *beorgan* ‘protect’. *Climban* ‘climb’ and *meltan* ‘melt’ became weak verbs.

Class IV had few members even in OE, but they were mostly verbs used very frequently, verbs that resisted loss and weakening remarkably well, *þweran* ‘stir’ and *hwelan* ‘roar’ dropped out of the language, but none of the common strong verbs of this class weakened during ME. Class V had numerous anomalies in OE and suffered many losses in ME. Among the total losses were *gefēon* ‘rejoice’ and *screpan* ‘scrape’. (PDE *scrape* is not a descendant of OE *screpan*, but a loan from Old Norse *skrapa*, a weak verb in ON.) Two of the Class V verbs that became weak by the end of ME are *metan* ‘measure’ and *plegan* ‘play’. Class VI fared better, although it lost *alan* ‘nourish’ and *spanan* ‘seduce’, while *bacan* ‘bake’ and *faran* ‘go’ became weak. The great variety of infinitive and past participle vowels in Class VII tended to obscure the identity of the class as a whole, and its position was shaky in ME. Among the numerous losses were *blōtan* ‘sacrifice’ and *lācan* ‘leap’; *fealdan* ‘fold’ and *weaxan* ‘grow’ became weak verbs.

Though the overwhelming tendency during ME was for strong verbs to give way to weak, there were occasional reversals such as *wear* and *dig*. The French loan *strive* entered as a Class I strong verb instead of a weak verb. The parallels between Old Norse and Old English strong verbs were so close that strong Old Norse verbs usually entered English as members of the corresponding English strong verb class. Examples include *take*, *get*, *give*, *sling*, and *thrive* (but *die* and *leak* came in as weak verbs).

Table 6.7 summarizes the strong verb classes in ME; the forms are listed in typical ME spellings. It presents, however, a highly idealized picture; there was great variation even among the forms for a single verb. In general, the tendency was for the vowels of the singular and plural preterite to become alike and to become identical with the vowel of the past participle. By EMnE, the distinction between singular and plural preterite was lost, but some distinctions between the preterite and the past participle vowels remain, of course, to the present day.

A comparison of the ablaut series of ME listed in Table 6.7 with those for Old English Table 5.10 shows that the vowels of the principal parts of most classes of strong verbs underwent both qualitative and quantitative changes during ME. Regular sound changes affected the quality of the vowels of Classes 2, 4, and 5, in particular. The lengthening of vowels in open syllables affected the vowel of the infinitive in Classes 4, 5, and 6 and that of the past participle in Classes 2, 4, 5, and 6. All of these changes tended to weaken the cohesiveness of the category of strong verbs as a whole and of individual classes of strong verbs. It is no accident that the best-preserved class of strong verbs in PDE, Class 3, has undergone the least change in its vowels over the centuries.

Weak Verbs In terms of sheer numbers, far more weak verbs than strong verbs were lost between OE and ME; a handful of examples are *bāsnian* ‘await’; *clynnan* ‘resound’; *drohtian* ‘behave’; *efenlācan* ‘to be like’ *forcwȳsan* ‘to shake violently’; and *hwemman* ‘to bend’. However, there were far more weak verbs to begin

with, and most of the many new verbs coming into ME from Scandinavian and French came in as weak verbs. Just a few examples of the hundreds of new verbs from French are *cover*, *join*, *languish*, *move*, *notice*, *plead*, *please*, *save*, *spend*, *store*, and *waste*. Among the scores of weak verbs from Norse are *blather*, *call*, *cast*, *clip*, *crawl*, *droop*, *gape*, *glitter*, *lift*, *raise*, *stagger*, and *want*.

In general, two classes of weak verbs could be identified, those with a preterite in *-ed(e)* and those with a preterite in *-de* or *-te* (without a preceding *e* before the dental ending). However, this distinction was to be lost by the end of ME as the vowel preceding the dental consonant gradually dropped out.

Other Verbs Of the anomalous verbs *be*, *do*, *will*, and *go*, *do* and *will* developed more or less regularly in ME. By the end of the ME period, the two separate present tenses that *to be* had had in OE (see Table 5.11) had collapsed to one, though the particular forms used varied over the period and from area to area. In the singular present indicative, the older forms from *wesan* (*am*, *art*, *is*) eventually prevailed, but the infinitive *wesan* gave way to *be(n)*. In the plural present indicative, the older *sind(on)* was lost entirely. *Beop* and *be(n)* were both widely used, and a new form *are(n)*, probably influenced by the parallel ON plural forms (*erum*, *erub*, *eru*), also arose. *Are* was ultimately to prevail in the standard language, but *they be* continued to be acceptable until well into the EMnE period and survives dialectally to the present day. The OE past tense of the verb *to go* (*eode*, *eodon*) survived into ME, but during ME, the past tense from the verb *wendan* (also meaning “to go”) began to replace the older form; *went* of course eventually supplanted *eode* completely, though Chaucer still regularly used *yede* and *yeden* as past tenses of *go*.

Most of the OE preterite-present verbs survived into ME and usually retained their OE functions and meanings. Examples include ME *wot* ‘know’; *can* ‘know how to’; *þarf* ‘need’; *owe* ‘possess’; *dar* ‘dare’; *mot* ‘can, must’; *may* ‘be able to’; *shal* ‘must, have to’. Most of the preterite-present verbs had had nonfinite forms such as an infinitive and a past participle in OE, but these were lost in ME, and this group of verbs became defective, like the modal auxiliaries of PDE, which lack nonfinite forms.

Table 6.8 presents the complete conjugation of two ME verbs, the strong verb “to find” and the weak verb “to look.” Because there were so many differences in the endings characteristic of the major dialectal regions, separate forms are listed for the North, the Midlands, and the South. Even so, not all variants are listed. However, the actual picture was by no means as neat as Table 6.8 implies; there was a great deal of fluctuation and mingling of types, and the same ME author frequently used two or more variants within the same text.

A comparison of Table 6.8 with Table 5.10 will reveal that the major distinctions of OE were well preserved in most areas during ME. The OE distinction between classes of weak verbs disappeared in ME, so only one weak verb is presented in Table 6.8.

One other feature of ME verb morphology is worth noting here because it represents another example of the tendency of English to move from a synthetic to an analytic language. Old English had had an extensive series of verbal prefixes (*ā-*, *be-*, *ed-*, *on-*, *op-*, *or-*, *ofer-*) that modified the meaning or function of the

T A B L E 6.8 ME Verb Conjugations

		Strong			Weak		
		North	Midlands	South	North	Midlands	South
Infinitive		find	finde(n)	finde(n)	lok(e)	loke(n)	loke(n)
Present Tense							
Indicative							
	Sg. 1	find(e)	finde	finde	lok(e)	loke	loke
	2	findes	findest	findest	lokes	lokest	lokest
	3	findes	findep, (-es)	findep	lokes	lokep, (-es)	lokep
	Pl.	find(es)	finde(n), (-es)	findep	loke(s)	loke(n), (-es)	lokep
Subjunctive	Sg.	find(e)	finde	finde	lok(e)	loke	loke
	Pl.	find(en)	finde(n)	finde(n)	lok(en)	loke(n)	loke(n)
Imperative	Sg. 2	find	find	find	lok	lok	lok
	Pl. 2	findes	findep	findep	lokes	lokep	lokep
Pres. Participle		findand(e), finding(e)	findende, finding(e)	findinde, finding(e)	lokand(e), loking(e)	lokend(e), loking(e)	lokinde, loking(e)
Preterite Tense							
Indicative	Sg. 1, 3	fand	fond	fond	loked	loked(e)	loked(e)
	2	fand	founde	founde	loked	lokedest	lokedest
	Pl.	fand	founde(n)	founde(n)	loked	loked(en)	loked(en)
Subjunctive	Sg.	fand	founde	founde	loked	loked(e)	loked(e)
	Pl.	fand	founde(n)	founde(n)	loked	loked(en)	loked(en)
Past Participle		funden	(y)founden	(y)founden	loked	(y)loked	(y)loked

verbs to which they were attached. For example, *giefan* meant “give,” whereas *āgiefan* meant “give up”; *tēon* meant “draw, tug,” but *ontēon* meant “draw to oneself”; *brecan* meant “break,” and *forbrecan* meant “break into pieces, destroy.” During ME, this process occurred less and less (though it survives, to a limited extent, in PDE as in *form* and *transform*). Gradually replacing these prefixes was the use of separate adverbial particles that altered the meaning in various, often subtle ways. The process was probably at least reinforced by Old Norse influence because such verb + adverb combinations were very common in ON well before they were widely used in English. By the fourteenth century, such two-part verbs occurred frequently, and we find instances like *He put his hand in* and *blow out þe light*. In the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer says of the Pardoner’s hood *For it was trussed up in his walet*.

Uninflected Word Classes

Prepositions In Old English, inflections had been a major way of expressing syntactic relationships in the sentence. In Middle English, other means had to fill the gap left by the loss of inflections. One of these means was increased use of prepositions and the adoption of new prepositions to express more delicate relationships. Most of the OE prepositions survived into the ME period, though *mid* ‘along with’ gave way to *with* by the fifteenth century, and *umbe* ‘around, about’ was also lost during ME.

New prepositions were formed by compounding two or more existing prepositions, by converting other parts of speech, and by borrowing from Norse, French, and even Latin. Among the new compounds of ME were *above*, *out of*, and *unto*. Some of the conversions included *along* (from an OE adjective), *among* (from the OE prepositional phrase *on gemong* ‘in a crowd’), and *behind* and *beneath* from OE adverbs. French elements provided *according to*, *around*, and *during*, among others. *Till* came from Old Norse and *except* from Latin.

Indeed, so many new prepositions entered the language during Middle English that a number of them proved superfluous and were later lost. Examples include *forewith* ‘in front of’, *evenlong* ‘along’, and *onunder* ‘beneath’. French borrowings that eventually fell into disuse include *sans* ‘without’, *countre* ‘against’, and *maugre* ‘in spite of’.

Conjunctions Most of the OE simple coordinating conjunctions survived in ME, including *and*, *ac* ‘but, and’, and *or* (a contraction of OE *opþe*, with the final /r/ added by analogy with other conjunctions like *whether* and *either*).

By far the most frequent, all-purpose subordinating conjunction of ME was *þat* ‘that’, although the OE *þe* survived until the thirteenth century or so. Other subordinating conjunctions inherited from OE included *gif* ‘if’, *þeah* ‘though’, and *ere* ‘before’. As the language increasingly used subordination where it had earlier made do with coordination and simple parataxis (a style characterized by subordinate clauses), new subordinators were needed. These developed primarily from other parts of speech, more often than not supported by *þat*. From the

interrogative adverbs and pronouns came *how þat*, *which þat*, and *when þat*. Other parts of speech contributed *after þat*, *because þat*, *also soone as þat* ‘as soon as’, *þe while þat*, and *til þat*. Among the other compound subordinating conjunctions were *þer as*, *for why*, and *right as*.

However, even as new conjunctions were proliferating, an older type was being lost. These were the correlative conjunctions consisting of the same word used before two (or more) clauses (OE *ge ... ge*, *þonne ... þonne*, and so on). Although *þa ... þa* ‘when ... then’, *so ... so*, and *þat ... þat* were still used in ME, the type was eventually to disappear from English, except for PDE *the ... the*.

Adverbs The chief means of forming adverbs in OE had been the addition of *-e* to the base form of the adjective. This process continued to some extent in ME, but, as the final *-e* was lost in pronunciation, the distinction between adjective and adverb was lost. Seemingly, the distinction is an important one in the language, for a new way of distinguishing adjective and adverb developed even as the older one was fading. In OE, *-lic /liċ/* had been an adjective-making suffix; a final *-e* could be added to this suffix to form an adverb. During ME, the final consonant was lost, but the suffix *-ly* itself came to be treated as an adverbial marker. Even though many existing adjectives also ended in *-ly* (for example, *earthly*, *manly*, and *homely*), the suffix was no longer productive as a source of new adjectives and came to serve as an adverb marker only.

The comparative and superlative forms of adverbs developed parallel to those of adjectives in ME. During the entire ME period, *ne* ‘not’ was the normal negating adverb, though *noht* from the OE noun *nāht* ‘nothing’ began to appear. The word *nothing* was also used adverbially. *Never* was the ME reflex of OE *nāfre*.

One of the striking characteristics of ME was its wide assortment of intensifying adverbs, including *all*, *clean*, *downright*, *enough*, *fair*, *fele*, *full*, *passing*, *pure*, *quite*, *right*, *sore*, *swipe*, and *well*. All of these can, without too much inaccuracy, be translated simply as “very”; *very* itself, however, remained an adjective meaning “true” until after the fifteenth century. Among the numerous adverbs that served to weaken, rather than intensify, the adjectives they preceded were *little*, *nigh* ‘nearly’, *scarce*, and *somedeal* ‘somewhat’.

Interjections By ME times, many texts attempted to reproduce actual speech, so we know more about the interjections used than we do for Old English. Among the various onomatopoetic interjections were *a* for surprise, *ho* for triumph, *ha-ha* for laughter, *fie* for disgust, and *hay* for excitement. *Lo*, *now*, and *what* were all attention-getting words, and *alas*, *wo*, and *wei-la-wei* could be used to express grief.

Salutation formulas of the ME period included *hail* and *welcome*. Chaucer uses both *good morrow* and *good night*, abbreviated forms of “have a good morrow (morning)” and “have a good night”—demonstrating that the ubiquitous *have a nice day* of PDE has a long history. *Farewell* first appeared in late ME.

Other social formulas included *gramercy* ‘thank you’, borrowed from the Old French *grant merci* ‘great favor’ and originally meaning “may God grant you great

favor (for your kindness).” The modern *thank you* first appeared in late ME. One of the most versatile interjections of the period was *benedicite* ‘bless’, common as a greeting, as a verbal charm against evil (cf. PDE *Bless you!*, said when someone sneezes) and simply as an expression of surprise.

Profanity seems to have been as common as it is today; people swore by *God, Deus, Christ, Mary, Peter*, and a wide assortment of favorite saints. When Chaucer’s Miller swears “By armes, and by blood and bones,” this would have been considered the harshest possible swear as he was making a curse on Christ’s body. We see this survive in Shakespeare’s “‘Zounds!” and “‘Sblood!” (“God’s wounds,” “God’s blood”). Tauno Mustanoja has noted that *Goddamn* was so widely used by English troops in France during the Hundred Years War that the term itself became a synonym for “Englishman” among the French.

MIDDLE ENGLISH SYNTAX

W 6.10

The word order of Middle English, predictably, falls between that of Old English and that of Present-Day English, less free than OE but often with more options than PDE allows. Further, the tendency toward rigidity of syntax increases throughout the ME period as inflections are lost. By late ME, we find sentence after sentence with word orders that would be completely acceptable in PDE. For example, if the spelling in the following passage from a 1432 description of a reception in London were modernized, it would read like a slightly rambling but nonetheless contemporary piece of English.

And when they sawe the kyng come, the maire with the aldermen rode to the kyng, and welcomed hym with all reuerence, honour, and obeysaunce. And the kyng thanked hem [them] and he come ridyng thurgh all the peple; and they obeyed and seid: “Welcom, oure liege and kyng, welcom!”

Syntax within Phrases

Noun Phrases As in both OE and PDE, single-word adjectivals usually preceded their nouns.

an erþely servaunt	a gentyl and noble esquier
<i>an earthly servant</i>	<i>a gentle and noble esquire</i>
gret heuy rente	þese seuene partes
<i>great heavy rent</i>	<i>these seven parts</i>

These examples also show the development of articles in ME. The indefinite article originated as an unstressed variant of the numeral *one*; the uninflected definite article represents a split from the demonstrative pronoun. The following example illustrates the definite article in its two major contemporary functions of marking uniqueness (*þe son, þe mone*) and of indicating something that has

previously been identified (*þe kandel*). As in PDE, the articles always immediately preceded the noun or the attributive adjective modifying the noun.

þou sees þe son bryghtar þan a kandeale, þe kandel bryghtar þan þe mone
you see the sun brighter than a candle, the candle brighter than the moon

As in Old English, but less frequently, the adjective + noun order was occasionally reversed, especially in poetry or in phrases translated from French or Latin. However, by ME, titles used with a proper name usually preceded the name; titles of foreign personages often were preceded by a definite article.

shoures soote	an heven indivisible
<i>showers sweet</i>	<i>a heaven indivisible</i>
kyng Richarde	þe kyng Alexandre
<i>King Richard</i>	<i>the king Alexander</i>

Again like OE, when a noun had multiple single-word modifiers, one sometimes preceded the noun and the rest followed it.

a gode wyt and a retentyff meny cites and tounes, faire, noble, and ryche
a good wit and a retentive many cities and towns, fair, noble, and rich

Phrasal modifiers predictably followed the words they modified.

þe zennes þet comeþ of glotounye and of lecherie the cercles abouten here hedes
the sins that come from gluttony and from lechery the circlets around their heads

As in PDE, possessive nouns usually preceded the words they modified. Occasionally, the possessive marker was written as an independent possessive adjective, though this practice was not to become highly frequent until the EMnE period. Note that no apostrophe was used with possessive nouns.

oþer <u>mens</u> prosperite	go to þe <u>raven is</u> neste
<i>other men's prosperity</i>	<i>go to the raven's nest</i>

An innovation in ME was the use of the *of* possessive, a usage at least supported by the parallel French possessive with *de*.

aftyr þe lawes <u>of oure londe</u>	deopnesse <u>of sunne</u>
<i>according to the laws of our land</i>	<i>deepness of sin</i>

The group possessive (also called group genitive), so characteristic of PDE (as in *the spider on the wall's legs*), was only just beginning to appear in ME, and the typical order of such phrases was possessive + noun + noun modifiers.

the Dukes place of Lancastre
the Duke's place of Lancaster ("the Duke of Lancaster's place")
 Criste, þe keyng sonn of heven
Christ, the king's son of heaven ("Christ, the king of heaven's son")

The double possessive (with both an *of* phrase and a possessive noun or pronoun) also made its first appearance during ME.

the capteyn ... toke away .j. obligacion of myn þat was due
the captain ... took away one obligation of mine that was due

Noun adjuncts, the use of one noun to modify another without a change in the form of the modifying noun, first appeared in ME, but they did not become common until later.

Take perselly rotes, fenell rotes, perytory and isope.
Take parsley roots, fennel roots, pellitory and hyssop.

Noun adjuncts are also common in PDE, for example, *chicken soup*, *fieldhouse*, *market communications manager*, and *Website design*.

Adverbial Modifiers Adverbial modifiers in ME tended to precede the words they modified more frequently than is typical in PDE. Nonetheless, placement after the verbs or other modified words was also common.

Ye shul first in alle youre werkes mekely biseken to the heighe God
You must first in all your works meekly beseech to the high God
 And 3et sche wyst ful wel þat ...
And yet she knew very well that ...

The negative *ne* always preceded the verb, and other negatives preceded the verb or verb phrase more often than in PDE. *Ne* often contracted with following common verbs and auxiliaries. However, the PDE placement of the negative after the auxiliary verb also appears in ME, as the second example below shows.

I nolde fange a ferthyng for seynt Thomas shryne
I would not take a farthing for St. Thomas's shrine
 he shal nat been ashamed to lerne hem
he must not be ashamed to learn them

Double negatives were freely used and indeed could pile up heavily, as in Chaucer's famous description of the Knight in his General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* (the second example below).

ne tolde heo þen engle non tale
not told she the angel no tale
 He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight
He never yet no villainy not said / In all his life to no kind (of) creature

Prepositional Phrases As has always been true in English, prepositions normally preceded their objects in ME, but, as in OE, prepositions occasionally followed their objects, especially if the object was a pronoun.

Excuse me of negligence Towards love in alle wise

Excuse me for negligence toward love in all ways

rycht till the bra syd he 3eid / And stert be-hynd hym on his sted
straight to the hillside he went / And jumped behind him on his horse

he seyde him to

he said him to

Another bugbear of modern prescriptive grammar, the placement of the preposition after its object when its object is a relative pronoun or when the verb is passive, first appeared in ME. In general, the preposition in such constructions came toward the end or at the end of the phrase.

Relative the place that I of speke
the place that I of speak

Relative preciouсе stanes þat he myght by a kingdom with
precious stones that he could buy a kingdom with

Passive þes opir wordis of þis bischop ouȝte to be taken hede to
these other words of this bishop ought to be taken heed to

Verb Phrases The rich system of compound verb phrases that characterizes PDE was not fully developed, even by the end of ME, but it had its genesis during the ME period. The perfect tense in particular, rare in OE, became common in ME. Both *be* and *have* were used as auxiliaries, but, even as *be* became the only auxiliary for the passive voice, it lost ground as an auxiliary for the perfect. By the end of ME, *be* was limited as a perfect auxiliary to intransitive verbs of motion.

pou hauest don oure kunne wo
You have done our family woe

I am com to myne ende
I have come to my end

summe of the Iewes han gon vp the mountaynes
some of the Jews have gone up the mountains

The perfect infinitive first appeared during the fourteenth century, possibly under French and Latin influence.

to have holden hem under
to have held them under

Although the progressive “tense” came into being during ME, its precise origins are uncertain. Most likely, it represents a fusion (and confusion) of (1) verb + present participle as adjective and (2) verb + *on* + gerund. By late ME, both the present participle and the gerund ended in *-ing*, so confusion between the two forms is understandable. The progressive system was not fully developed until late in the EMnE period, but examples of its incipient use are easy to find during the entire ME period. The combination of the progressive

and the perfect, however, did not appear until the latter part of the fourteenth century and was never common in ME.

Participle	For now <u>is</u> gode Gawayn <u>goande</u> ryȝt here <i>For now is good Gawain going right here</i>
Gerund	I <u>am yn beldyng</u> of a pore hous <i>I am (in) building of a poor house</i>
Perfect Progressive	We <u>han ben waitynge</u> all this fourtenyght <i>We have been waiting all this fortnight</i>

Old English had used both the verb *wesen* ‘to be’ and *weorþan* ‘to become’ to form passive constructions. During the course of ME, the latter verb was lost completely, and only ‘to be’ was left as the passive auxiliary.

Hir clothes weren makid of right delye thredes
Her clothes were made of very delicate threads

It was also during the course of ME that *by* became the normal preposition for indicating the agent of a passive verb.

[men] That wol nat be governed by hir wyves
[men] that will not be governed by their wives

English has never had a separate inflected future tense, and OE normally used the present tense to express the future, allowing context and adverbs of time to make the future meaning clear. By ME, the modal auxiliaries *shall* and *will* appeared more and more frequently as indicators of future time, though some degree of obligation (*shall*) or volition (*will*) usually accompanied the future meanings.

Quan al mankinde ... Sal ben fro dede to live broȝt
When all mankind ... shall be from dead to living brought
and swiche wolle have the kyngdom of helle, and not of hevene
and such will have the kingdom of hell, and not of heaven

In line with the generally analytic trend of the language, Middle English began increasingly to use modal auxiliaries like *may* and *might* and quasi-modals like *be going to* and *be about to* in place of the inflected subjunctive. Nonetheless, the inflected subjunctive was still used far more frequently in ME than it is in PDE, especially to express an optative meaning and in hypothetical subordinate clauses.

Modal	þat y <u>mowe</u> riche be <i>that I may rich be</i>
Modal	the gretteste and strongeste garrysoun that a riche man <u>may</u> <i>the greatest and strongest garrison that a rich man can</i>
Subjunctive	have ... is that he <u>be</u> biloved <i>have ... is that he be beloved</i>

Quasi-modal Satan is zeorne abuten uorto ridlen þe ut of mine corne
Satan is eagerly about to sift you out of my grain

Quasi-modal Thys onhappy sowle ... was goyng to be broughte into helle
This unhappy soul ... was going to be brought into hell

Subjunctive how lawful so it were
however lawful it might be

Subjunctive why nere I deed!
why am I not dead!

The one auxiliary that underwent an almost explosive growth during ME was *do*. Though its use varied dialectally and over time, four main functions of *do* as auxiliary verb can be recognized during the period. First, its earlier use as a pro-verb (a verb that stands in place of a main verb) substituting for an already mentioned verb continued.

they [camels] may forbere drynk ii. dayes or iii. and so may not the hors do.
they can forgo drinking two days or three and thus can not the horse do

Second, in some parts of England, *do* was used as a causative (causing or forcing an agent to perform an action), more or less equivalent to the PDE use of *make* or *have*. As a causative, it was in competition with *make*, *let*, and (in the North) *ger*.

and al hys halles I wol do peynte with pure gold
and all his halls I will have painted with pure gold

Jesu Crist þat makede to go þe halte
Jesus Christ, who caused the lame to walk

þe princes ... gert nakers strike and trumpes blaw
the princes had drums struck and trumpets blown

Third, *do* was used periphrastically (when a grammatical relationship is expressed through a free morpheme rather than inflection), seemingly as an alternative to the simple tenses. This might look like that of the PDE “emphatic” *do*, but it frequently occurred in contexts where no emphasis or contradiction is apparent. This use of *do* was to increase greatly in EMnE, only to be lost again in PDE.

unto the mayde that hir doth serve
to the maid that her does serve

Fourth, the PDE use of *do* in negative and interrogative clauses was just beginning during the ME period, though it was never as common as the simple verb in such constructions.

my maister dyd not graunt it ‘Fader, why do ye wepe?’
my master did not grant it ‘Father, why do you weep?’

Old English had had a number of impersonal verbs, that is, verbs without an expressed subject but often with an accompanying pronoun in the accusative or

dative case. The number of such verbs increased during ME, partly under French influence. At the same time, they gradually evolved into personal verbs with expressed subjects in the nominative (subject) case or with a “dummy” subject *it* (as in the third example below).

Me thristed sare, drinc yee me brought

I was very thirsty, drink you me brought

Me dremyd ... þat I was ledd to durham

I dreamed ... that I was led to Durham

Hit þe likede wel þat þu us adun læidest

It pleased you well that you us down laid

In Old English, the ending *-an* had been sufficient to mark the infinitive. After the loss of final unstressed syllables in ME, a preposition preceding the verb substituted for the inflectional ending. *For to* originally expressed purpose, later became a simple infinitive marker, and finally died out. *Till* and *at* sometimes appeared as infinitive markers in Northern texts; both reflect Scandinavian usage.⁴ However, *to* was always the most common, and by the end of the ME period, it had prevailed over the alternative markers.

Syntax within Clauses

As we saw in the preceding chapter, if we take subject (S), verb (V), and object/complement (O) as the basic elements of a clause, then OE allowed every possible order of elements (SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, and OVS). We also saw that OE already had favorite orders, most of them still familiar in PDE. In ME, we find continuations of some OE patterns different from those of PDE, but the trend was toward modern word order, and by the end of ME, PDE patterns were firmly established.

For straight affirmative independent clauses, the SVO order was, as it has always been in English, the most common. Unlike OE, however, the SVO order was also frequent after adverbials and in dependent clauses, including indirect questions.

Independent Thyn Astrolabie hath a ring to putten on the thombe

clause *Your astrolabe has a ring to put on the thumb*

After In the contre of Ethyop they slen here childeryn byform here goddys

adverbial *In the country of Ethiopia they slay their children in front of their gods*

Dependent þe taverne ys þe scole of þe dyevle huere his deciples studieþ

clause *the tavern is the school of the devil where his disciples study*

Indirect men askede hire how scho myghte swa lyffe

question *people asked her how she could thus live*

4. One well-hidden survival of the use of *at* to mark the infinitive is the word *ado*, originally *at do*. We have reinvented this compound with the English preposition *to* in the word *to-do*.

The order SOV, almost totally alien to PDE, can at least occasionally be found throughout the entire ME period, especially (a) when the object is a pronoun, (b) in dependent clauses, or (c) with compound tenses, where the object usually comes between the two parts of the verb.

Pronoun object	If a man will þe harme <i>If a man wants (to) you harm</i>
Dependent clause	þat ðu þis weork naht ne forlate <i>that you this work not (not) neglect</i>
Compound tense	wo haueþ þe in þe putte ibroute? <i>who has you in the well put?</i>

As in OE, the order VS(O) was regular in direct questions and in imperatives with an expressed subject. It was common, but not universal, after introductory adverbials.

Direct question	Gaf ye the chyld any thyng? <i>Gave you the child any thing?</i>
Direct question	What seye we eek of hem that deliten hem in sweryng <i>What say we also of them that delight (themselves) in swearing</i>
Imperative	And wete ye wel that thour this desert may non hors passe <i>And know you well that through this desert can no horse pass</i>
After Adverbial	Nowe haue ye herde þe vertues & þe significacouns <i>Now have you heard the virtues and the meanings</i>

The order OSV was a fairly common means (as it is today in speech) of emphasizing the direct object or complement.

Emphatic d.o.	This bok I haue mad and wretyn <i>This book I have made and written</i>
Emphatic comp.	Merchaunt he was in his zonghede <i>Merchant he was in his youth</i>

Another common variant was the order (O)VS.

Clothis have they none but of the skynnys of bestis. <i>Clothes have they none except of the skins of beasts.</i>
Now more of the deth of kynge Arthur coude I never fynde <i>Now more about the death of King Arthur could I never find</i>

Old English had frequently had subjectless sentences when the context or the inflections of verbs made the meaning of the sentence clear. During ME, the feeling seems to have arisen that a sentence must have a subject, regardless of whether the context requires it. By the end of ME, the “dummy” subjects *there* and *it* were being used regularly to fill the subject slot when no other logical

subject was available. Note that the *there* in the first clause below is really a kind of pronoun and not an adverb of place.

Another remedie there is ayenst slouth
Another remedy there is against sloth

And whan the passhion nyghed it is certayne that the tre floterid above
And when the Passion drew near it is certain that the tree floated above

Syntax of Sentences

Like OE, ME favored the cumulative, or run-on, sentence over the periodic sentence. Coordination, rather than heavy subordination, was the general rule for connecting clauses. The result is sentences that are normally easy to understand but that seem loose and inelegant by modern standards. To illustrate this we use two brief passages, one from relatively early in the ME period and one from the end of the ME period. The first sample is from the *Ancrene Wisse*, or “Behavior of anchoresses.” (An anchoress was a female religious recluse; this book was a manual of rules for such recluses.) The original text was written about the year 1200 by an unknown cleric at the request of three noble sisters who intended to retire to a contemplative life. The following text is from a manuscript copied in the first half of the thirteenth century.

3e mine leoue sustren bute 3ef neod ow driue & ower meistre hit reade. ne
You, my dear sisters, unless need you compels & your master it advises, not
 schulen habbe na beast bute cat ane. Ancre þe haueð ahte. þuncheð bet
should have no beast except cat only. anchoress who has cattle seems more
 husewif ase Marthe wes. ne lihtlice ne mei ha nawt beo Marie marthe suster
housewife than Martha was; not easily not can she not be Mary, Martha's sister,
 wið griðfullnesse of heorte. for þenne mot ha þenchen of þe kues foddre.
with serenity of heart. For then must she think of the cow's fodder,
 of heordemonne hure. Olhnin þe heiward. wearien hwen he punt hire. &
of herdsman's hire, flatter the hayward, beware when he impounds it, and
 zelden þah þe hearmes. ladlich þing is hit wat crist hwen me
pay, moreover, the damages. Loathly thing is it, Christ knows, when people
 madeð i tune man of ancre ahte.
make in town complaint of anchoress' cattle.

The second sample is from Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, written about 1460–70. Punctuation and capitalization in this passage have been modernized.

Than sir Launcelot had a condicion that he used of custom to clatir in
Then Sir Launcelot had a condition so that he was accustomed to chatter in
 his slepe and to speke oftyen of hys lady, quene Gwenyver. So sir Launcelot
his sleep and to speak often of his lady. Queen Guinevere. So Sir Launcelot

had awayked as longe as hit had pleased hym, and so by course of kynde he
had been awake as long as it had pleased him, and so by course of nature he
 slepte and dame Elayne bothe. And in his slepe he talked and claterde as a
slept and Dame Elaine both. And in his sleep he talked and chattered like a
 jay of the love that had bene betwyxte quene Gwenyver and hym and so as
jay of the love that had been between Queen Guinevere and him and because
 he talked so lowde the quene harde hym thereas she lay in her chambir.
he talked so loud the queen heard him where she lay in her chamber.

Middle English prose translations often attempted to replicate in English the convoluted and heavily subordinated syntax of their Latin originals. These attempts were usually not especially successful stylistically; not until the EMnE period were English writers to achieve a sophisticated English prose style that incorporated Latinate subordinating devices smoothly into the natural syntax and rhythms of English. The following brief passage from Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* is fairly typical of what happened when ME prose writers tried to imitate Latin exemplars. See the appendix for more of Chaucer's translation with an explanation.

"This world," quod I, "of so manye and diverse and contraryous parties,
"This world," said I, "of so many and diverse and adverse parts,
 ne myghte nevere han ben assembled in o forme, but yif ther ne were oon that
not could never have been united in one form, unless there not were one that
 conjoyned so manye diverse thinges; and the same diversite of here natures,
composed so many diverse things; and the very diversity of their natures,
 that so discorden the ton fro that other, most departen and unjoynen the
that so disagree the one from the other, must separate and disjoin the
 thinges that ben conjoynid, yif ther ne were oon that contenyde that he
things that are composed, if there not were one that held together what he
 hath conjoynid and ybounden.
has composed and bound.

Syntax of Poetry

The syntax of ME verse was essentially the same as that of the prose. However, to meet the exigencies of rhyme or proper stress placement, poets were likely to employ inversions much more frequently than was typical of prose. Complexity of sentence structure varied widely, from the simple syntax of lyrics and ballads, to slightly more complex structures in many verse romances, to the extraordinarily complex syntax of such carefully wrought poetry as the opening lines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The following lyric, "Mirie It Is While Sumer Ilast," is dated about 1225. The sentence structure is basically simple. There is, however, inversion of the predicate adjective *mirie* in the first line, of subject and verb in the third line,

and of adjective and noun in the fourth line—all of these inversions made in order to get rhyming words into the proper position at the end of the line.

Mirie it is while sumer ilast,
Merry it is while summer lasts,

Wið fugheles song.
With birds' song.

Oc nu necheð windes blast
But now draws near wind's blast,

And weder strong.
And weather fierce.

Showing somewhat less inversion but slightly more complicated sentence structure is the following passage from *Sir Orfeo*, a Breton lai (a short romance with supernatural elements) dated about 1325.

Orfeo was a king,
Orfeo was a king,

In Ingland an heiȝe lording,
In England a high lord,

A stalworþ man and hardi bo,
A stalwart man and hardy both,

Large and carteis he was also.
Generous and courteous he was also.

His fader was comen of King Pluto
His father was come from King Pluto

And his moder of King Iuno,
And his mother from King Juno,

þat sumtime were as godes yhold
That once were as gods held

For auentours þat þai dede and told.
For adventures that they did and told.

This syntactic simplicity may be contrasted with the opening lines of Chaucer's General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. Inversion is only moderate, but the syntax is ambitious indeed: the eighteen lines reproduced here comprise a single sentence of eleven clauses, and no independent clause appears until line 12.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
When April with its showers sweet

The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
The drought of March has pierced to the root,

And bathed every veyne in swich licour
And bathed every vein in such moisture

- Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Of which virtue engendered is the flower;
- 5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
When Zephirus also with his sweet breath
- Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
Breathed on has in every field and heath
- The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
The tender crops, and the young sun
- Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
Has in the Ram its half course run,
- And smale foweles maken melodye,
And small birds make melody,
- 10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
That sleep all the night with open eye
- (So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
(So spurs them nature in their hearts);
- Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
Then desire people to go on pilgrimages,
- And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
And palmers to seek strange shores,
- To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
To remote shrines, familiar in various lands;
- 15 And specially from every shires ende
And especially from every shire's end
- Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
Of England to Canterbury they go,
- The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
The holy blessed martyr to seek,
- That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
That them has helped when they were sick.

MIDDLE ENGLISH LEXICON

Perhaps the two most salient characteristics of Present-Day English are its highly analytic grammar and its immense lexicon. Both of these features originated during the ME period. Although English lost all but a handful of its inflections during ME and has undergone little inflectional change since, ME marks only the onset of the burgeoning of the English vocabulary to its current unparalleled size among the languages of the world. Ever since ME, the language has been more than hospitable to loanwords from other languages, and all subsequent periods have seen comparable influxes of loans and increases in vocabulary.

W 6.11

The thousands of loanwords that poured into English after the Norman Conquest had an effect beyond that of merely adding new terms and synonyms to the language. They also provided the raw material for an intricate system of *levels* of vocabulary ranging from the colloquial through the formal, from the everyday to the highly technical, from the general to the highly specialized. Through the thousands of Latin-based roots, they also mark the beginning of the highly cosmopolitan nature of English today.

By the ME period, the English language was well suited linguistically to borrow easily and freely from other languages. Its inflectional simplicity meant that English speakers could adopt words without having to worry about what inflectional classes they belonged to—whether they were weak or strong; masculine, feminine, or neuter; whether they should be *i*-stems, *ā*-stems, or special stems reserved for non-native words. This point may seem trivial, but heavily inflected languages often have difficulty in assimilating loanwords and treat words that are borrowed so specially that their foreignness is not easily lost. In Russian, for example, loanwords often are clearly marked as aliens by (a) violating Russian spelling conventions, (b) having natural rather than grammatical gender, and (c) being indeclinable. The loanword *madam*, for example, is indeclinable even though most Russian nouns are declined for six cases, and feminine even though it would be masculine if it were a native word (because native Russian words ending in a consonant are masculine). Even Japanese people, whose proclivity for borrowing English words is sometimes a source of amusement to English speakers, marks loanwords as “different” writing them in a special syllabary. English, on the other hand, has borrowed so many words from so many sources over the centuries since ME that almost nothing looks or sounds extremely exotic. If it does, that does not matter either, because there are so many other “un-English” words already in the language; *wok* (from Chinese) was accepted more readily as an English word because it had been preceded by *batik* (from Malay) and *kayak* (from Eskimo).

To a lesser extent, the wide variety of phonemes and the complex allowable syllable structure of English also facilitates adoption of loanwords in recognizable form. For example, English could borrow the Chinese word *shantung* as the name for a kind of silk fabric manufactured in Shantung, China, because both *shan* and *tung* fit English syllable-structure rules. Chinese, with its highly restricted syllable structure, would have had much more difficulty trying to fit English *polyester* into Chinese; hence, it settled for a kind of loan-translation (or *calque*) and calls the product *ju-zhi* (‘assemble’ + ‘ester’).

Loanwords

The greatest inundation of loanwords into ME came from French, but English borrowings from other languages also appeared at this time. In particular, there were numerous Scandinavian (Norse) and Latin contributions to the English lexicon, along with a handful of words from other languages, European and non-European.

Scandinavian Influence Chronologically, the first significant new source of loanwords in ME was Scandinavian. (At this time, the differences among Danish,

Swedish, and Norwegian were so slight that it is unnecessary to try to distinguish them; hence we use the more general terms Norse or Scandinavian.) Many of the Scandinavian words that first appear in writing during ME were actually borrowed earlier, but, particularly in a society with a low literacy rate, there is a lag between use in speech and first appearance in writing. When they were written down, it was usually first in the North and the East Midlands, those regions with heaviest Norse settlements. The following lists are representative but not exhaustive.

c. 1150-1250

anger, bag, band, bloom, both, bound (going to), bull, cake, call, carp (complain), cast, clip (cut), club, die, egg, fellow, flit, gad, gape, gear, get, hit, husband, ill, kid, kindle, loan, loft, loose, low, meek, muck, raise, ransack, rid, root, rotten, sale, same, scab, scale, scare, scathe, score (20), seat, seem, skill, skin, sky, sly, snare, swain, take, thrall, thrive, thrust, thwart, trust, ugly, wand, want, wassail, window, wing

c. 1250-1350

awe, bait, ball, bark (of tree), bat (the animal), birth, blend, bole, bracken, brad, brunt, crawl, dirt, dregs, droop, flat, flaw, geld, gift, girth, glitter, leg, lift, likely, midden, mire, mistake, odd, race, rag, rive, rugged, skate (the fish), slaughter, sleight, slight, snub, stack, stagger, stem, teem, weak, whirl

c. 1350-1500

awkward, bask, bawl, bulk, down (feathers), eddy, firth, flag, freckle, froth, gap, gasp, keel, keg, leak, link, raft, reef (sail), reindeer, scant, scrap, steak, tatter, tether, tyke

Almost all of these words are common in English today and so native in appearance that it is hard to believe that they are loans from another language. Part of their familiarity is explainable by the fact that they have been in the language for so long that they have had plenty of time to become fully assimilated. Further, Scandinavian is so closely related to English that these loans “feel” like English.

Some of the Norse loans (such as *both*, *call*, and *take*) express such basic concepts that we feel they must be native words, that Old English could not have done without them. Old English did have its own terms for the concepts, but, unlike the majority of ME loans from French or Latin, Norse loans often supplanted rather than supplemented native vocabulary. Thus Norse *call* replaced OE *hātan*, *both* replaced OE *bā*, and *take* replaced OE *niman* and *fōn*. In other instances, the Norse loan took over only part of the domain of the native English word, while the English word survived in a narrowed usage. For example, ON *sky* replaced OE *heofon* as the general term for the upper atmosphere, but *heaven* survives, especially in the sense of “dwelling-place of God.” Occasionally, both the native word and the Norse loan survive as almost complete synonyms; few people could specify any distinct difference in meaning between Norse *crawl* and native English *creep*.

A number of the Norse loans are cognates of existing English words. Usually doublets that survived have undergone a differentiation in meaning—each has

carved out a specialized semantic territory for itself. Examples include Norse *raise*, *skin*, and *skirt*, cognates of native *rear*, *shin*, and *shirt*. In a few instances, blends have occurred. For example, *reindeer* is a blend of ON *hrein* ‘reindeer’ and English *deer* (from OE *dēor* ‘wild animal’).

Most of these early Norse loans represent basic everyday words and lack the apparent intellectual sophistication of so many French and Latin loans. Nonetheless, a number of them have come to express remarkably subtle distinctions of meaning. *Awkward* has a domain of its own, separate from its many near-synonyms such as *clumsy*, *ungainly*, *ungraceful*, *gauche*, *gawky*, *maladroit*, or *unskillful*. Similarly, none of the words like *mild*, *submissive*, *humble*, *patient*, *stoical*, *gentle*, *forbearing*, *long-suffering*, *unresisting*, or *unassuming* quite captures the precise meaning of *meek*.

In addition to its contributions to the general vocabulary, Norse introduced a number of new place-name elements into English, especially into the areas heavily settled by Scandinavians. Chief among these were *-beck* ‘brook’, *-by* ‘town’, *-dale* ‘valley’, *-thorp* ‘village’, *-thwaite* ‘piece of land’, and *-toft* ‘piece of ground’. Within a relatively small area of Cumberland and Westmorland, for instance, are settlements named Grizebeck, Troutbeck, Thursby, Glassonby, Knarsdale, Uldale, Braithwaite, and Seathwaite. In the old Danelaw area in the east, *-beck* and *-thwaite* names are scarcer, but the map is dotted with such places as Eastoft, Langtoft, Ugthorpe, and Fridaythorpe. English settlers were later to import these names to all parts of the globe—from Yelvertoft, Australia, to Uniondale, South Africa, to Oglethorpe, Georgia, to Moresby Island, British Columbia.

Finally, Norse influence was heavy at about the time the English began to use surnames, so Norse was able to give English the common surname suffix *-son*. This suffix proved so popular that it was attached not only to first names of Norse origin (*Nelson*, *Anderson*), but also to native English names (*Edwardson*, *Edmundson*) and even to French names (*Jackson*, *Henryson*). English did not, however, adopt the Scandinavian practice of using *-datter* ‘daughter’ as a surname suffix for females.

French Influence Important as the Norse influence has been to English, in terms of sheer numbers, it looks small beside that of French. By 1400, the nature of the English lexicon had been transformed by the flood of French loanwords. For the first hundred years after the Conquest, the rate at which the French loans entered English seems to have been relatively slow. The usual explanation for this slow start is that it took several generations of bilingualism for English speakers to be comfortable with French words. Another factor, however, is the paucity of texts in English before 1200; if we have no texts, we have no way of telling how many French words were being used by English speakers. Probably the borrowing varied greatly from area to area and from individual to individual. The *Ormulum* and Layamon’s *Brut*, both written in English about the year 1200, have few French loans—that is particularly surprising in the case of the *Brut* because it is a translation from a French original. On the other hand, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, written at approximately the same time, has dozens of different French loanwords within its 1,794 lines. These range from legal or quasi-legal

terms like *accord*, *plead*, *rent*, and *spouse*, to humbler words like *carter*, *flower*, *pie* (magpie), and *stubble*, to adjectives such as *gent* ('noble-born'), *jealous*, and *poor*. There are even hybrids with French roots and English affixes, such as *disputing* and *overquatic* ('glut'). Such a wide variety of types of words suggests that French loans had already thoroughly permeated the English vocabulary and that they were not limited to specific semantic fields.

The number of French loans making their first appearance in English texts increased steadily during the thirteenth century, crested during the fourteenth century, and then began to decline toward the end of the fourteenth century. Almost every aspect of civilization was represented in these French loans. Space prevents more than a fractional sampling of the thousands of French words still used today that entered the language during ME, so we have simply selected a dozen broad semantic areas and listed some French loans representing each.

Relationships and Ranks parentage, ancestor, aunt, uncle, cousin, gentle (man), peer, servant, page, madam, sir, princess, duke, count, marquis, baron

The House and Its Furnishings porch, cellar, pantry, closet, parlor, chimney, arch, (window)pane, chair, table, lamp, couch, cushion, mirror, curtain, quilt, towel, blanket

Food and Eating dinner, supper, taste, broil, fry, plate, goblet, serve, beverage, sauce, salad, gravy, fruit, grape, beef, pork, mutton, salmon, sugar, onion, cloves, mustard

Fashion fashion, dress, garment, coat, cloak, boots, serge, cotton, satin, fur, button, ribbon, embroider, pleat, jewel, pearl, bracelet

Sports and Entertainment tournament, kennel, scent, terrier, stallion, park, dance, chess, checkers, fool, prize, tennis, racket, audience, entertain, amusement, recreation

Arts, Music, Literature art, painting, sculpture, portrait, color, music, melody, lute, carol, poet, story, chapter, title, romance, tragedy, ballad

Education study, science, reason, university, college, dean, grammar, noun, subject, test, pupil, copy, pen, pencil, paper, page, chapter, lectern

Medicine medicine, surgeon, pain, disease, remedy, cure, contagious, plague, pulse, fracture, drug, balm, herb, powder, sulfur, bandage, ointment, poison

Government government, state, country, city, village, office, rule, reign, public, crown, court, police, tyranny, subsidy, tax, counselor, treasurer, register, mayor, citizen

Law judge, jury, appeal, evidence, inquest, accuse, proof, convict, pardon, attorney, heir, statute, broker, fine, punish, prison, crime, felony, arson, innocent, just

The Church chapel, choir, cloister, crucifix, religion, clergy, chaplain, sermon, confession, penance, pray, anoint, absolve, trinity, faith, miracle, temptation, heresy, divine, salvation

The Military enemy, battle, defense, peace, force, advance, capture, siege, attack, retreat, army, navy, soldier, guard, sergeant, captain, spy, moat, order, march, trophy

In addition to its contribution to the vocabulary of specialized areas, French has given English hundreds of short and common words, words so familiar and so widely used that they seem completely native today. Again, we can give only a small sample.

age, blame, catch, chance, change, close, cry, dally, enter, face, fail, fine, flower, fresh, grease, grouch, hello, hurt, join, kerchief, large, letter, line, mischief, move, offer, part, pay, people, piece, place, please, poor, pure, rock, roll, save, search, sign, square, stuff, strange, sure, touch, try, turn, use

With this pervasive influence of French in so many semantic areas, it is surprising (and even consoling) to discover that some aspects of English life remained relatively untouched by French loanwords. One of these areas was shipping and seafaring, though, as we shall see, this area had many loans from Low German and Dutch. Another area was farming and agriculture in general. The word *farm* itself is from French, and *agriculture* is a loan from Latin. However, the Norman masters themselves apparently left their English servants to work the fields by themselves, for most basic farming terminology remains native English to this day. All of the following words come down directly from Old English.

acre, loam, field, hedge, furrow, sow, till, reap, harvest, plough, sickle, scythe, shovel, spade, rake, seed, wheat, barley, corn, beans, oats, grass, hay, fodder, ox, horse, cow, swine, sheep, hen, goose, duck, sty, pen, barn, fold

Finally, because the French came to England as administrators and did not make entirely new settlements consisting only of French-speaking inhabitants, the French, unlike the Norse, contributed no place-name elements to England.

Almost all of the thousands of French loans that came into the language during ME were nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Unlike Norse, French contributed little to the basic grammar of English. We have no pronouns from French. Though a few of our prepositions and conjunctions (*in spite of*, *because*, *during*, *regarding*, *in case*) are ultimately French, they came into English as nouns or verbs and were converted to function words only after they had been thoroughly naturalized. The noun *cause*, for instance, is first recorded in English during the early thirteenth century, but the phrase *by cause of* does not appear until the mid-fourteenth century, and the conjunction *because* only in the late fourteenth century.

As our earlier examples from *The Owl and the Nightingale* illustrated, French roots were combined freely with English affixes from the beginning. Further, English was soon borrowing French affixes. Sometimes French suffixes were applied to English roots (e.g., *starvation*), but most of them were usually reserved for use with French (or Latin) roots. French prefixes were borrowed even more

freely and were used on both native and borrowed roots. So extensive was this practice that some native prefixes were totally replaced by their French equivalents. French *counter-* supplanted the native English *with-* ‘against’; although *with-* survives in a few words like *withhold*, *withstand*, and *withdraw*, we no longer use it to make new words. Even with native roots, we must say *counterblow*, not *withblow*.

Most of the earliest French loanwords into Middle English came from Norman French, but by the fourteenth century, the majority of loans were from Central, or Parisian, French, which had become the prestigious dialect in France. In many instances, it is impossible to identify the original French dialect, but in other cases phonological differences distinguish the forms. In words originally borrowed from Germanic, Germanic /gw/ became /w/ in Norman and /g/ in Central French. Thus, beside Norman *wile*, *warrant*, *war*, and *wage*, English also has the Central French forms *guile*, *guaranty*, *garrison*, and *gauge*. In Norman French, Latin /k/ before /a/ remained, while in Central French it became /ç/. Hence we have such doublets in English as Norman *canal*, *cattle*, *catch*, and *car* versus Central French *channel*, *chattels*, *chase*, and *chariot*.

A surprisingly large number of the French words borrowed into English during ME were words that French originally borrowed from Germanic. Often doublets of these words still exist, though changed in form and meaning. For example, the French loan *equip* is from the same Germanic root as English *ship*. French *soup* is a doublet of native English *sop*, and *grape* is a doublet of native *grapple*.

Latin Influence By the late fourteenth century, no one could have written an English text of any length without using loanwords from French, but it still would have been possible to write on many topics without using Latin loanwords. Of course, most French loans were ultimately from Latin, but direct loans from Latin into ME tended to be learned words borrowed through the written translation of Latin texts. Because Latin was the official language of the Church, a number of religious terms came directly into English from Latin, such as *apocalypse*, *limbo*, and *purgatory*. Latin was also frequently used in legal documents, so English borrowed such words as *testament* and *confederate*. A few of the other miscellaneous learned words directly from Latin are *admit*, *divide*, *comprehend*, *lunatic*, *lapidary*, and *temporal*. All in all, although a great many Latin loans came into ME, the real deluge was not to take place until the Early Modern English period.

Celtic Influence Loanwords from Celtic into English have always been few. Still, several are recorded for the first time during ME, including *bard*, *clan*, *crag*, *glen*, and *loch*. Possibly but not certainly from Celtic are *bald*, *bray*, *bug*, *gull*, *hog*, and *loop*. French had a large number of words of Celtic origin, and some of them (*car*, *change*, *garter*, *mutton*, *socket*) came into English via French, but these were of course only indirect loans.

Dutch and Low German Influence During the latter part of the ME period, commerce between England and the Low Countries increased greatly, particularly as a result of the wool trade, and several dozen loans from Dutch and/or Low German entered English as a result of this contact. Reflecting the seafaring interests of the Dutch are words like *halibut*, *pump*, *shore*, *skipper*, and *whiting*. The containers in which merchandise was shipped brought words like *bundle*, *bung*, *cork*, *dowel*, *firkin*, and *tub*. Trade in general gave English words like *trade* and *huckster*. There were also miscellaneous words such as *clock*, *damp*, *grime*, *luck*, *offal*, *scour*, *speckle*, *splinter*, *tallow*, and *wriggle*.

Influence from Other Languages There was little Greek scholarship in England during the ME period and therefore almost no direct borrowing from Greek. Indirectly through French, English acquired a few items like *squirrel*, *diaper*, and *cinnamon*. More learned Greek words entered through Latin; a few examples are *philosophy*, *paradigm*, *phlegm*, *synod*, and *physic*.

As Europe increased its knowledge of the Levant (countries on the Eastern Mediterranean sea) through the Crusades and the spread of Islam, many Arabic and Persian words were borrowed into European languages. English, however, almost always acquired these secondhand through French or Medieval Latin. Among the indirect borrowings from Arabic during ME are the words *azimuth*, *ream*, *saffron*, *cipher*, and *alkali*. Ultimately from Persian, though sometimes filtered through several other languages on the way to English, are *borax*, *mummy*, *musk*, *spinach*, *taffeta*, and *lemon*. From Hebrew via French or Latin are *jubilee*, *leviathan*, and *cider*. Middle English received Slavic *sable* and Hungarian *coach* via French.

At all periods of its history, English has received words whose origins simply cannot be traced to any source. Among the items of unknown origin that are first recorded in ME are such familiar words as *bicker*, *big*, *boy*, *clasp*, *junk*, *kidney*, *lass*, *noose*, *puzzle*, *roam*, *slender*, *throb*, and *wallet*.

Formation of New Words

W 6.12

Despite the thousands of loanwords from French and other sources that poured into English during ME, the language did not stop creating new words by the older processes of compounding and affixing. Indeed, the loanwords provided new raw material for both processes, and new processes of formation developed during the period.

Compounding The loss of inflections made compounding even easier, although, because of this loss and because of functional shift, it is often hard to decide whether an element in a compound is, say, a noun or a verb. Thus the compound *windfall* could be interpreted as noun + noun (a fall caused by the wind) or as noun + verb (the wind makes it fall). As in OE, the majority of the many new compounds in ME were nouns or adjectives. Foreign elements entered freely into the new compounds (for instance, *gentleman* consists of French *gentle* + native *man*).

The most productive types of OE compound nouns continued in ME. New noun + noun compounds included such words as *cheesecake*, *toadstool*, *bagpipe*, *nightmare*, and *wheelbarrow*. Adjective + noun compounds can be illustrated by *sweetheart*, *wildfire*, *quicksand*, and *commonwealth*. Among the adverb + noun compounds were *insight*, *afternoon*, and *upland*. Just coming into use during ME were noun + verb compounds like *sunshine* and *nosebleed*. We also begin to find verb + noun combinations such as *hangman*, *pastime*, and *whirlwind*. ME also saw the beginning of a type that was eventually to become highly productive in English, the verb + adverb compound; two examples from ME are *runabout* and *lean-to*. Another new type was adverb + verb, including words like *outcome*, *outcast*, and *upset*. English also borrowed—or loan-translated—a number of French and Latin phrases with the order noun + adjective (*knight-errant*, *heir-apparent*, *sum total*). However, this type violated the basic English principle that an attributive adjective precedes its noun, and the type has never become common in English.

Among the compound adjectives, the OE type noun + adjective continued to be productive; ME examples include *threadbare*, *bloodred*, and *headstrong*. Much less common was the adjective + noun type (*everyday*).

As in OE, compound verbs in ME were usually formed from preexisting compound nouns or adjectives. The OE type of adverb (or particle) + verb continued to be employed: *outline*, *uphold*, *overturn*, *underwrite* all appeared for the first time in ME. Just coming into English was a new type consisting of noun + verb, as in *manhandle*; most of these compounds, however, were the products of back-formation from nouns (compare modern *babysit* from *babysitter*), and the type would not become common until Early Modern English.

Some of the compounds that first appear in ME have lost their transparency as compounds because of sound changes or because one or both of the constituents have become obsolete as independent words. Few native speakers today would recognize *cockney* as consisting of *cock* + *egg*, or *gossamer* as *goose* + *summer*. *Wanton* does not look like a compound because both *wan* ‘deficient’ and *towen* ‘to bring up, educate’ have been lost; the original compound meant “poorly brought up.”

A number of the loanwords borrowed from French or Latin during ME were compounds or phrases in origin but were treated as single units in English. For example, Latin *dies mali* ‘evil days’ has become *dismal*; French *porc épin* ‘spiny pig’ has been anglicized as *porcupine*.

Affixing Despite the extensive borrowing of words from French, the continued productiveness of compounding and the loss of some native prefixes and suffixes, affixing continued to be one of the chief ways to create words in Middle English.

A few OE affixes were totally lost, not even surviving in already-formed words (or not being recognized as affixes if they did). Among these were *ed-* ‘again’ (replaced by French/Latin *re-*); *el-* ‘foreign’; *ymb-* ‘around’; *to-* ‘motion toward’; and *-end*, which was used in OE to form agentive nouns. Other native affixes survived in preexisting words but lost most or all of their productiveness.

An Early Spelling Reformer

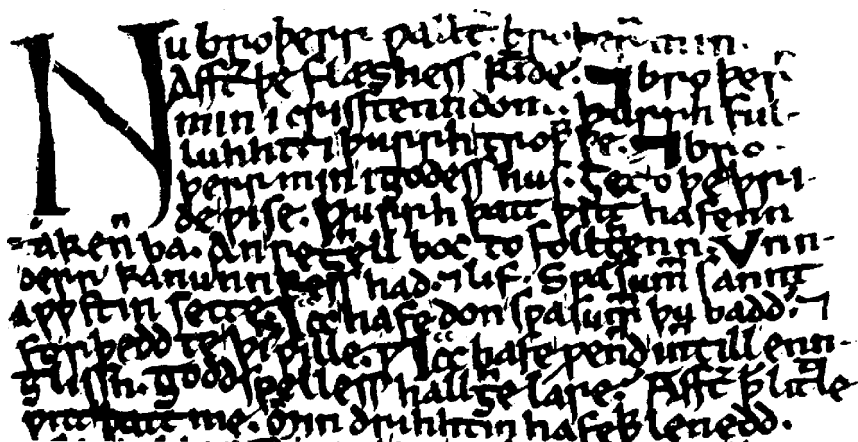
Widespread interest in spelling reform for English did not develop until the sixteenth century. However, one English writer devised his own spelling system at the beginning of the thirteenth century, even though his chief purpose may have been to aid reading aloud rather than to reform the spelling.

Orm—the name is Scandinavian, meaning “serpent”—was an Augustinian canon from the East Midlands who set for himself the task of instructing ordinary people in Church doctrine through a collection of homilies. Each homily consisted of a translation of a passage from the Gospels, followed by an explanation and application of this passage.

If Orm had completed his work, it would have been 150,000 lines long; as it is, 20,000 short verses survive. Orm used a monotonously regular fifteen-syllable line unadorned by either alliteration or rhyme. Because he did attempt to represent pronunciation in his spelling, the *Ormulum*, as his work is called, is a valuable source of information about the Middle English language. The most noticeable feature of Orm’s spelling system is the doubling of consonants to indicate that the preceding vowel is short, although he is not absolutely consistent in this practice. Orm somewhat sporadically employs breve marks (˘) and macrons (¯) to indicate vowel length.

The *Ormulum* survives in a single manuscript today, probably Orm’s autographic copy. As the facsimile of the opening lines shows, it is not an easy text to read.

Facsimile of the dedicaton page of *Ormulum*, MS Bodley Junius I. Reprinted by permission of the The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.



Transliteration

Nu broþerr wallter. broþerr min.
 affter þe flæshess kinde. broþerr
 min i cristenndom. þurh ful-
 uhht & þurh trowwe. & bro-
 þerr min i godess hus zet o þe pri-
 de wise. þurh þatt witt hafenn
 tākenn ba. an rezhell boc to follzhenn. Vnn-
 derr kanunnkess had. & lif. Swasumm sannt

awwstin sette. lcc hafe don swasumm þu badd &
for þedd te þin wille. l̥c hafe wenn̥d innttill enn-
glissh. goddspelless hallzhe lare. Affter þatt little
wit. þatt me. min drihhtin hafeþþ lenedd.

Translation

Now, Brother Walter—my brother by nature of flesh, and my brother in Christendom through baptism and through faith and my brother in God's house [and] still in the third way—that we two have taken one rule book to follow under canonhood and life, as St. Augustine established [it]. I have done as you asked and performed your will. I have turned into English [the] gospel's holy teaching according to the little wit that my Lord has lent me.

SOURCE: From *The Ormulum*: with the Notes and Glossary of Dr. R. M. White, edited by Rev. Robert Holt, M.A., Vol. I (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1878), dedication page facsimile.

Examples include *with-* as in *withstand*; *for-* as in *forsake*, *forswear*; and *-hood* as in *motherhood*, *childhood*.

Among the new prefixes borrowed from French during ME are *counter-*, *de-*, *in-*, *inter-*, *mal-*, and *re-*. Suffixes from French include *-able*, *-age*, *-al*, *-ery*, *-ess*, *-ify*, *-ist*, *-ity*, and *-ment*. Some affixes, such as *re-*, were freely attached to native words and loanwords alike. Others have always retained their association with French or Latin; for example, despite the hundreds of words in English ending in *-ment*, we would hesitate to form an abstract noun by attaching *-ment* to a native root. In other words, although we are thoroughly comfortable with *discernment*, which received its *-ment* after entering English, we find **understandment* or **knowment* decidedly unacceptable and prefer to use the native gerund suffix *-ing* instead (*understanding*, *knowing*).

Minor Sources of New Words As mentioned in the preceding chapter, PDE has a number of sources of new vocabulary items for which we have no evidence in surviving OE texts. However, in the more extensive and more diversified texts from ME, a number of these processes make their first appearance.

Clipping, the process whereby one or more syllables are subtracted from a word, became common in ME with words of French origin. This is not surprising. Native English words usually have their major stress on the first syllable; hence the native speaker hearing a French word would tend to interpret it as beginning with the onset of the major stress.⁵ Often both the clipped and the full forms survive in English, usually with a differentiation in meaning. A few of the many possible examples from ME are *fray* (< *affray*), *squire* (< *esquire*), *stress* (< *distress*), and *peal* (< *appeal*).

Somewhat similar to clipping in result, though not in principle, is the **back formation**, a new word formed by mistakenly interpreting an existing word as

5. This tendency is still strong in English. Young children often pass through a stage during which they clip all syllables prior to the major stress of words. Such children say *brella* for *umbrella*, *cide* for *decide*, etc.

having been derived from it. Thus English speakers interpreted the final *-s* of French *offreis* as a plural suffix and created the new word *orphrey*. Similarly, *asp* is a back formation of the (singular) Latin *aspis*, *fog* a back formation from the Scandinavian loan *foggy*, and *dawn* from earlier English *dawning*.

Blends, also called **portmanteau** words, are combinations of two existing words to form a new word. In PDE, the process is often deliberate (*sexploitation* from *sex* + *exploitation*; *staycation* from *stay* + *vacation*; *ginormous* from *gigantic* + *enormous*), but it was probably still an unconscious process in Middle English. Particularly for earlier periods, it is not always easy to be sure precisely what the original components of a blend were, or even whether a particular item should be considered a blend or an echoic word. However, among the numerous probable blends from ME are *scroll* from *escrow* + *roll*; *scrawl* from *sprout* + *crawl*; and *quaver* from *quake* + *waver*.

Common nouns that originated as proper nouns also begin to appear in Middle English. These could be from a person's name, like *jacket* from French *Jacques*; or they could be from place names, like *magnet* from *Magnesia* and *denim* from *de Nîmes*. We see this in PDE with brand names that become common terms, like *aspirin*, *Kleenex*, *Velcro*, and *granola*.

Among the fairly numerous onomatopoeic (echoic, words that echo the sound they denote or symbolize, such as *barf*, *bingo*, and *vroom*) words first recorded in ME are *blubber*, *buzz*, and the now archaic or dialectal word *dush* 'to crash'. One of the more famous echoic words from the period is *tehee*, representing the sound of a giggle, first recorded in Chaucer.

Old English does not provide us with clear-cut examples of folk etymology, primarily because folk etymologies normally originate as attempts to make semantic sense of unfamiliar words or parts of words. By ME, many OE words had become obsolete; when these appeared in compounds still in use, the compounds were often restructured with more familiar elements. One example is *earwig* from OE *earwīga*, originally a compound of *ĕar* 'ear' and *wīga* 'insect'. After *wīga* fell into disuse as an independent word, the earlier compound was altered to *earwig*. Similarly, OE *hlēapwince* (from *hlēapan* 'jump' and *wince* 'wink'), the name of a plover-like bird, was altered in ME to *lapwing*.

Lost Vocabulary

W 6.13

Much of the extensive vocabulary of Old English was lost during the ME period. Cultural and technological change is responsible for the vast majority of losses from the native vocabulary during ME. The imposition of a foreign culture upon a nation is bound to have drastic effects upon its language. The miracle, perhaps, is that English survived as intact as it did.

To state exactly how many OE words were lost by the end of the ME period is impossible. Of the recorded OE words, we often do not know how widely used and generally familiar many were during Old English itself.

The vocabulary loss seems particularly heavy among compounds. However, we cannot be sure how many of the OE compounds recorded only once or

twice were not part of the permanent vocabulary. Contemporary speakers of English constantly make up new compound words according to the same principles used by OE speakers. For example, if I have a special implement that I use to dust my books, I may call it my *bookmop*. I pronounce this combination with heavy stress on the first syllable; it is an inseparable compound in my speech; I write it as one word. Yet I would hesitate to call it an English “word,” and I certainly would not expect to find it listed in a contemporary dictionary. In any case, though hundreds of recorded OE compounds are no longer in use, both components of many of them are still in the language. For instance, *cwenfu-gol* ‘hen’ is gone, but both *queen* and *fowl* survive. We have lost the compound adjective *limsēoc* but retain both *limb* and *sick*.

Conversely, the language sometimes preserves what once were independent words only as parts of compounds (though they may not always be recognized as compounds today). *Gār* ‘spear’ is gone, but *garlic* ‘spear’ + ‘leek’ remains. *Hrif* ‘belly’ is no longer used but survives marginally in *midriff*.

Sometimes OE words have been preserved only in specialized vocabularies. The average speaker of English today will not recognize the OE words *ribbe* ‘ribwort’, but the plant fancier or botanist will see in it the ancestor of PDE *ribgrass* and *ribwort*. Similarly, a particular kind of bird known in OE as a *cūscote* is normally called a *ringdove* today but in Scotland and other dialectal areas, it is still a *cushat*.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the bulk of the OE vocabulary is no longer in use today, and the majority of this loss occurred during ME. Most common words have survived, but most of the rest are gone. Replacement by French words accounts for the preponderance of the loss, including a number of frequently used words. For example, OE *earn* ‘poor’ has been replaced by French *poor*; OE *griþ* by French *peace*; OE *herian* by French *praise*; OE *þeod* by French *people*. As mentioned earlier, Scandinavian words also replaced a number of common OE words; for example, OE *giefu* was lost to Norse *gift* and OE *þeon* to Norse *thrive*.

Not all the losses are to loanwords from other languages, however. Sometimes one English word has replaced another. Thus English *spider* has supplanted English *ātorcoppe* (except dialectally), *body* has replaced *līchama*, *crazy* has replaced *wōd*, *neck* has replaced *heals*, and *often* has replaced *gelōme*.

In still other instances, cultural and technological changes have simply rendered the referent obsolete. Only a few of the many possible examples are OE *folgop* ‘body of retainers’, *gytfeorm* ‘ploughing feast’, *hōcāsern* ‘small sickle’, *hoppāda* ‘upper garment’. As any birdwatcher or wild-plant enthusiast knows, the popular names of birds and plants are highly varied and unstable, so it is not surprising if such names for birds as *hice* and *hulfestres*, or such names for plants as *hratele* and *lustmoce*, have been lost.

It is not only native words that have disappeared. Many of the loans from Norse and French were really unnecessary to begin with, so scores of recorded Norse loans and hundreds of recorded French loans have disappeared. Norse *cayre* ‘to ride’ and *grayþ* ‘grief, hurt’ did not survive the ME period; nor did French *alose* ‘praise’, *manse* ‘curse’, *rehayte* ‘encourage’, or *talentif* ‘desirous’.

MIDDLE ENGLISH SEMANTICS

W 6.14

As noted in Chapter 5, semantic change is difficult to treat systematically because it is so intimately connected to the highly unsystematic real world. The causes of semantic change are multiple and usually undetectable from a distance of several centuries. For many OE words we do not even know the denotative meanings because they occur so infrequently in surviving texts and because there were no English-to-English dictionaries compiled in OE times to record meanings of words. Without knowing the denotation of a word, we cannot know its connotations.

The possibility of dialectal differences in meaning at a given time is another complication. We may think we have discovered a semantic shift over time because the meaning of a given word in a text from year $X + 200$ is clearly different from its meaning in a text from year X . But it may be that we simply lack texts from another dialectal area for year X , an area in which the word had the same meaning in year X as in year $X + 200$. A contemporary example would be the word *jumper*. To most American speakers, a *jumper* is a sleeveless dress, but to most British speakers, it is a sweater of the type Americans call a *pullover*. (For that matter, if we asked an American electrician what a *jumper* was, the response would probably be “a wire used to bypass a circuit,” illustrating an occupational dialect.)

In Chapter 5, we discussed various types of semantic change, including generalization and narrowing, amelioration and pejoration, strengthening and weakening, shifts in stylistic level, and extreme shifts in denotation. These classifications are valid enough, but, alas, many semantic changes do not fit comfortably into cut-and-dried categories and may partake of several of them at the same time. Furthermore, semantic change is rarely all-or-none; overlapping in meaning can continue for generations, even centuries. The same word, with essentially the same denotation, may even have different connotations in different contexts. Again, a modern example may make the point clearer. The word *calculate* in most contexts has neutral (or even positive) connotations, for example, *calculating machines*, the *new calculator*, a *calculated risk*. But the word has strongly negative connotations in the phrase *a calculating person*.

However, as the old proverb says, what can't be cured must be endured. Failing a tidy world with tidy meanings, we must do what we can with a chaotic one. We will continue to use the categories of semantic change introduced in Chapter 1 but with the caveat that they are less than perfect descriptions of the actual semantic changes that occurred between OE and ME.

Narrowing and Generalization

The type of semantic change easiest to find between OE and ME (and during ME) is narrowing of meaning. Upon reflection, we should not find this too surprising: because the language acquired far more new words than it lost old ones, the result had to be either many complete synonyms or a general tendency to narrow meanings. For whatever reason, absolute synonyms are rare in language;

hence, many OE words acquired narrower, more specific meanings in ME as a direct result of loans from other languages. For example, the OE word *gōma* meant “jaw, palate, inside of the mouth.” With the Latin loan *palate* and the new word *jaw* from an unknown source, ME *gome* ‘gum’ came to refer only to the firm connective tissue that surrounds the teeth. OE *sand* had meant either “sand” or “shore.” When Low German *shore* was borrowed to refer to the land itself along a body of water, *sand* narrowed to mean only the granular particles of disintegrated rock that covered this land. OE *feðer* had meant “feather” or, in the plural, “wings”; when ME borrowed *wing* from Scandinavian, *feather* narrowed to refer only to the plumage of birds. Occasionally, narrowing resulted when one native word replaced another in part of its original meaning. OE *bēam* could mean either “tree” or the product of a tree (beam, timber, cross, and so on). OE *trēow* replaced *bēam* in its meaning of the plant in its living state, and at the same time *trēow* lost its own earlier applications to trees that had been cut up.

Generalization was less common than narrowing in ME, but there are still numerous examples. For instance, OE *bridd* had meant “young bird”; the general term for a bird was *fugel* ‘fowl’. During ME, *bird* generalized to include fowl of any age (and *fowl* simultaneously began to narrow in application to refer to larger, edible birds). The OE adjective *rūh* ‘rough’ meant “coarse (of cloth), hairy, shaggy.” In ME, this meaning was extended metaphorically to refer to seas, weather, actions, language, and sounds.

Amelioration and Pejoration

Examples of amelioration and pejoration are harder to pinpoint, partly because we cannot always be sure how pejorative or nonpejorative a word was, partly because much of the vocabulary of a language is not especially susceptible to the process. It is hard to see how some of the words just discussed, words like *sand*, *tree*, or *feather*, could acquire meanings that were either elevated or base. When we do detect pejoration, it is usually through context. For instance, we can be sure that OE *ceorl* ‘peasant, freeman, layman’ has degenerated in its meaning when we read a ME phrase like *the foule cherl*, *the swyn* (‘the foul churl, the swine’). Similarly, when we read in Chaucer about someone who is *so crafty* and *so sly*, we can be sure that *crafty* has degenerated from its OE meaning of “strong, skillful, clever.” A possible example of amelioration during ME might be, depending on one’s viewpoint, the word *dizzy*. In OE it meant “foolish,” a meaning that survives marginally in such expressions as *a dizzy blonde*; but by ME its primary meaning was “suffering from vertigo.”

Strengthening and Weakening

Like amelioration and pejoration, the processes of strengthening and weakening are limited to the kinds of words amenable to such change. In general, strengthening is rarer in language than weakening—evidence that people are more prone to exaggeration (which tends to weaken meanings) than to understatement (which tends to strengthen meanings). We see an example of strengthening in

the OE word *cniht*, which meant boy, which changed to ME *knight*, a member of the aristocracy and a soldier. One example of weakening during ME is that of the word *awe*. Its etymons (earlier forms of words in the same or ancestor language), OE *ege* and ON *agi*, had meant “terror, dread” in general. In ME, it came to refer especially to attitudes toward God, or “reverential fear and respect.” The weakened meaning suggests that fears of unworldly or future things are not as strong as immediate, worldly fears.

Abstraction and Concretization

Clear-cut examples of semantic shifts involving abstraction are not especially easy to find. First, many words can be used in both abstract and concrete senses; cf. PDE *power corrupts* and *a world power*. Second, abstraction is not an all-or-none phenomenon; some words are inherently more abstract than others. For example, *eyesight* is somehow less abstract than *fascism*. Third, there is a tendency in English to use special suffixes to create abstract words, as in *friend* vs. *friendship*. One example of an OE word that at least took on more abstract meanings in ME is OE *cnāwlāc* (PDE *knowledge*). In OE, it referred to the fact of or an act of recognition, acknowledgment, or confession. These meanings continued into ME, but in ME the word could also refer to cognition or the process of knowing. Conversely, OE *wā* ‘woe’ was either an interjection meaning “alas” or an abstract noun meaning “misery, affliction, evil.” By ME, the term could be used to mean a specific example of misfortune, as is illustrated in a ME translation of Revelations 9:12: *Oo woo passid, and lo! ȝit comen two wos*, that is, “One woe has passed, and lo! two more woes come.”

Shift in Connotation

Connotation is closely associated with stylistic level. The re-emergence of serious literature in English occurred at the same time that the language was being inundated with thousands of French loanwords, many of which would have been perceived as more elegant than corresponding native words. If the native word was not lost entirely, it often took on connotations of being “lower,” less suitable for formal contexts than the French word. One example would be the verb *smear*. OE *smierwan* meant “anoint, salve, smear.” With the advent of the French loan *anoint*, *smear* came to have connotations of crudeness and even contempt. Certainly today we could not speak seriously of a bishop’s *smearing* someone’s head with oil. But connotations do not always go simply from unfavorable to favorable or vice versa. OE *būr* (PDE *bower*) meant “dwelling-place” or “bedroom”; it was a derivative of the verb *būan* ‘to live, stay, dwell’ (cf. PDE *neighbor*, OE *nēahgebūr* ‘someone who lives near one’). By ME, however, *bower* was already taking on its modern poetic connotations, as can be seen from an early fourteenth-century quotation, *let me se þy blysful bor* ‘let me see your blissful bower’.

Shift in Denotation

Shifts in denotation tend to occur when what was once a subsidiary or extended meaning of a word becomes the central meaning. Examples from ME are

numerous. The basic meaning of OE *tīd* had been “time” (as in *Christmastide*). OE also had the words *hwīl* ‘time’ and *tīma*, which referred primarily to an extent or a period of time. The tides are of course related to time by being periodic. Because of this relationship and because the language already had other words that could take over the “time” meanings of *tide*, the core meaning of *tide* itself could shift.

Analogous shifts in denotation include that of *warp* from “throw” to “twist out of shape,” of *quicke* from “alive” to “rapid,” of *swing* from “strike, whip, rush” to “oscillate,” and of *spell* from “discourse, tale” to “incantational formula.” Note that all these changes in referent also involve a narrowing of meaning. The shift in denotation of *wan* is slightly different in principle. In OE, *wann* had meant “dark, dusky,” but during ME, it came to mean “pale,” seemingly a complete reversal of meaning. However, the common thread of the two meanings is *lack* of color (hue).

Many semantic changes are hard to classify because several kinds of changes have occurred simultaneously. The fate of the word *grin* provides a good illustration. OE *gremnian* meant “to grimace (either in pain or anger or in pleasure), to gnash the teeth, to draw back the lips and display the teeth”—close to what we mean by “make a face” today, but the involvement of the teeth seems to have been important. By late ME, *grin* had added the meaning of “to smile in a forced, unnatural manner” without losing completely the earlier meanings. By PDE, the core meaning has shifted still further to mean a broad smile. Since OE times, then, the meaning has narrowed to eliminate the meaning of “snarl” and “grimace in pain or anger.” It has also broadened to include the idea of smiling. There has been a shift in basic denotative focus from the teeth to the lips. (I can grin without showing my teeth but not without curling my lips upward.) And there certainly has been a change in connotation—we would not say “My hostess grinned politely as I complimented her on the dinner.”

In most of our examples illustrating semantic change, we have used native English words. Loanwords undergo the same kinds of changes. The French loan *garret* shifted in denotative meaning during ME from its earlier meaning of “turret on the top of a tower” to “watchtower.” By the end of ME, it was shifting again toward its PDE meaning of “room on the top floor.” When first introduced into English, the French loan *fairy* meant “fairyland,” “fairy people collectively,” or “magic.” In late ME, the meaning of “an individual supernatural being” was added, and all the other previous meanings were declining, though they were not to be totally lost until late EMnE. Hence Spenser could deliberately suggest both meanings in the title of his work *Faerie Queene* (1590): The *faerie queene* was simultaneously the queen of the fairies and a fairy creature. A dramatic example of semantic amelioration is that of the French loan *nice*. In its earliest uses in English, it meant “foolish, stupid, wanton.” During the fifteenth century, it began to improve its status by acquiring the additional meanings of “flamboyant, elegant, rare, modest” and acquired the pejorative meanings of “slothful, unmanly.” We must, however, wait until later periods for its present vague meaning of “pleasant” to develop.

MIDDLE ENGLISH DIALECTS

W 6.15

Our discussion of Middle English so far has concentrated primarily on features that were to prevail in the standard language (though “standard language” is itself a somewhat artificial concept). Middle English, however, was characterized by great dialectal diversity, seemingly a greater diversity than existed in Old English. It is possible that dialectal differences did increase during ME: the limited mobility of the English-speaking population in the years following the Conquest may well have led to linguistic isolation and consequent proliferation of dialectal differences. Still, the increase in differences and in the number of identifiable dialects in ME can easily be exaggerated—or, more accurately, the relative homogeneity of Old English is probably only superficial. First, we have a far greater number of surviving texts and texts from a wider geographical area for ME than for OE. Second, OE had a strong scribal tradition that tended to conceal existing dialectal differences under a standardized spelling. A parallel can be drawn with PDE. If we were to use spelling as our only guide, we would conclude that American and British speakers pronounced the words *schedule* and *lieutenant* alike (though they do not). Conversely, the spelling differences between American *realize* and *check* versus British *realise* and *cheque* would suggest that the two groups pronounced the words differently (though they do not). In sum, although there certainly was great dialectal diversity during the ME period, it did not make its first appearance then. Rather, the wider array of surviving texts and the loss of the OE scribal tradition made preexisting dialectal differences much more obvious.

For many years, historians of the language spoke confidently of five major dialect areas for ME: Northern, East Midlands, West Midlands, Southern, and Kentish. Lists of dialectal features for each area were compiled and dialect maps showing quite precise dialect boundaries (or **isoglosses**) were drawn up. Figure 6.3 shows the general location of these five dialect areas. Boundary lines between the dialect areas have, however, deliberately been omitted, for reasons to be explained below.

Fifty years ago, Angus McIntosh and his colleagues on the Middle English Dialect Survey showed that the previously accepted neat picture is a gross oversimplification. Instead of basing their conclusions on a handful of items and instead of examining texts from the entire ME period, McIntosh and his co-workers used a checklist of about 270 items and restricted their database to the years 1350–1450—a period for which large numbers of texts are available but also a period before the restandardization of spelling in English. Their procedures and findings are too complex to describe here, but they showed that sharp dialect boundaries simply did not exist in ME, that virtually every item on their checklist has its own distinctive isogloss (geographical boundary of a certain linguistic feature).

McIntosh and his colleagues identify the area in which a text was written, not so much by unique features as by unique *configurations* of features. The procedure can be illustrated by a highly simplified, abstract example. Assume you have four texts, all of which differ in four items. No text differs from all the



FIGURE 6.3 England During the Middle English Period

The dialectal situation during the Middle English period was highly complex. The map shows only the five broadest, most general divisions: Northern, West Midland, East Midland, Southern, and Kentish. Welsh was spoken in Wales, and Cornish, also a Celtic language, was still spoken in Cornwall. Note the Danelaw roughly bisecting the country; though the Danes no longer controlled the territory, the Danelaw remained a dialect boundary, especially for place names.

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others in any one item, but each text has its own configuration of items, as the diagram in Table 6.9 illustrates.

In actual practice, many more items are used as test words, and a single text is rarely absolutely consistent, even for a single item; the same text may use both *are* and *ben*, for example. Nonetheless, the principle is the same.

By beginning with “anchor” texts that can be precisely dated in time and located in geographical space and by extrapolating the information gathered from

TABLE 6.9 Schema of Possible Dialectal Patterns

Text	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4
A	sche	are	enough	gif
B	sche	are	enow	if
C	she	ben	enough	if
D	she	ben	enow	gif

these anchor texts, McIntosh and his associates have been able to identify the date and place of previously uncertain texts with a high degree of confidence.

As an example of the kinds of differences typically found in copies of the same text made in different parts of England, we reproduce below twelve six-line excerpts from *The Prick of Conscience* (*Ayenbite of Inwit*), a fourteenth-century moral poem of 9,624 lines designed to encourage righteousness, together with a map showing their locations. (See Figure 6.4). This poem must have been extraordinarily popular in its day, for it survives in over a hundred manuscripts, more than any other ME poem, including *The Canterbury Tales*. (In the following sentences underlining indicates abbreviations that have been spelled out to facilitate reading.)

1 (Devonshire)

And make the folk hym to honour
 As though he were here sauyour
 He schal saye thanne ry3t to cristene
 man
 Was neuer non be-fore h^s tyme be-gan
 Bote falsly crist he wol hym calle
 And saye þ^t hy be-levyth wrong alle

2 (Northeast Shropshire)

And make þe folk him to honoure
 And sey he is oure sauyoure
 He schal sey þ^t ri3t cristene man
 Was ner before his tyme bygan
 B^t false an^t cristus hem he schal calle
 And sey þei haue lyued þor3 wronge at
 alle

3 (Southeast Surrey)

To make þe folk hym honour
 & say he ys here sauyour
 He schal seye þat no crysten man
 By-fore hys tyme neuer by gan
 Bote false anticristys he schal hym calle
 And sey þ^t þy leued in false trowþe alle

4 (Yorkshire/Nottinghamshire border)

& make þo folke hym to honour
 & say he es þair soucoure
 He schall say þat right cristen man
 Was neuer befor his tyme be-gane
 Bot fals ancristes he schall hem call
 & say þai lifed in wronge trowth all

5 (Suffolk)

And make þe folk him to honour
 And seyn þat he is her saueour
 He schal seyn þ^t ryht cristen man
 Was neuer or his tyme be-gan
 But false antecrystes he schal hem calle
 And seyn þey liuid wrongliche alle

6 (Northern)

And make ye folke him to honour
 And say yat he is yaire saueour
 He sall say yat na right cristen man
 Was neuer be-fore yis tyme began
 Bot fals anticristes he sall yaim call
 Yat hase bene fra ye werldes begynnyng



FIGURE 6.4 Origins of *Prick of Conscience* Manuscripts

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7 (South Lincolnshire)

And so make þe folk hym to honoure
 And shal seie þat he is here saueoure
 He shal seie þat no cristene man
 Was before þat his tyme began
 And falce cristene he shal hem calle
 And seyn þat þei lyuen in falce troupe
 alle

9 (Northern)

And mak ye folk him to honoure
 And sall say y^t he es yair saueoure
 He sall say yat na ryght christen man
 Was neuer bi-for his tyme bi-gan
 Bot fals anticristes he sall yam call
 And say yai lyfed in fals trowth all

8 (Northeast Lancashire or possibly extreme western Yorkshire)

And make ye folke hym to honoure
 And say yat he is yair sauour
 He sall say yat right cristen man
 Was neuere be-fore or he began
 Bot fals ancristes he sall yaim calle
 And say yat yai lyued in wronge trouthe
 alle

10 (Wiltshire)

And make þe folke hym to honoure
 And seiþ þat ys here sauiour
 He schal seiþ þ^t no cristen man
 Neuere by fore hys tyme by-ganne
 Bote false antecristes he schal hym kalle
 And seiþ þ^t þey lyue in false trowþe all

11 (South Warwickshire)

And make þe folk hym to honoure
 And say þat he is heore sauore
 He schal sey þat no rȳt cristene man
 Neuere byfore hys tyme bygan
 Bote fals antecristes he schal hem calle
 And sey þat þey lyue in a fals truþe alle

12 (Monmouthshire, western Gloucestershire, or possibly South Wales)

And make þe folk hym to honoure
 And say he ys here sauoure
 He schal say þat rȳt cryste ne man
 Was neuere or hys tyme be-gan
 But fals antecrystes he schal hem calle
 And say þey leue in wrong þoru ouȳt
 alle

Six lines of text is, of course, far too small a sample on which to base a dialect analysis. Nonetheless, even these few lines illustrate some of the more distinctive characteristics of certain areas. For example, note that the Northern texts use the Norse form (with *þ*, confusingly identical with *ȳ*) for all cases of the third-person plural pronoun, while the other texts have *h-* in the object case and usually in the possessive case, but, except for the southernmost text (1), have *þ-* in the subject case. The Northern texts all have *sall* (instead of *schal*), *na* (instead of *no*), and do not distinguish *ȳ* and *þ* graphically. The southwesternmost texts use the grapheme *ȝ* where other regions have *gh* or *h*. Three different present indicative plural verb endings are illustrated here—*be-levyȝh* (1), *lyuen* (7), and *lyue* or *leue* (10, 11, 12). In contrast to these relatively neat observations, the wide variety of different spellings and even words for “before” defies easy generalization, at least on the basis of this tiny sample.

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

English was only one of three major literary languages in England during the ME period—and it ran a poor third at that. Latin was the only respectable language for serious literature and the only language for an international audience, and it would remain so for several centuries to come. All vernaculars, not just English, were universally regarded as inferior to Latin. Another incentive for writing in Latin was the awareness that English had changed and was continuing to change; if authors wanted their works to be accessible to posterity, they felt obliged to write in Latin. French was the language of the upper classes, and this Anglo-French dialect was, in fact, the vehicle of some of the best writing done in French anywhere during the period.

For most of the ME period, those authors who did write in English used their own dialects and were recognizable though only vaguely defined “schools” of literature arose in various regions. The West Midlands were earlier associated with the so-called Katherine Group of religious prose and later with alliterative poetry such as *Piers Plowman* and the work of the *Pearl*-poet. Richard Rolle’s mystical works are in a Yorkshire dialect, and Barbour’s *Bruce* in a Northern dialect. Toward the end of the period, however, when it became clear that the

London dialect would be a standard, authors began to use it even when it was not their native dialect in order to reach a national audience. Chaucer's family was from London, so he could be expected to write London English, but John Gower (from Kent) and John Lydgate (from Suffolk) also wrote in the London dialect.

Compared with what we have from the Old English period, the quantity of surviving ME literature is large, especially after 1250. Obviously, the later something was written, the better its chances for preservation, and the advent of printing at the end of the ME period saved much that would otherwise have been lost. Nevertheless, for a small population with a low literacy rate, the ME output is still surprisingly high. To be sure, much of this writing in English consists of translations, primarily from French and Latin, but sometimes from other European vernaculars. For example, the very late ME morality play *Everyman* is now generally agreed to be a translation of a Dutch original, *Elckerlijc*.

Much if not most of ME writing was done for oral presentation—relatively few people could read, and even those who could were just as accustomed to being read to as to reading to themselves. A listening audience has different expectations and different requirements from those of individual, silent readers. For example, in oral presentation, a fair amount of repetition is not only acceptable but essential because the audience cannot go back to reread something it missed the first time around.

As is true of OE literature, the great bulk of ME literature is anonymous. There was no cult of creativity or originality and little or no material incentive for authors to claim works as their own. Copyright had yet to be invented—and would have been virtually meaningless if it had existed because, without printing, books were handcopied one at a time and no one could ever make a fortune or even a decent profit by reproducing the works of others.

Another characteristic of ME literature alien to modern readers is the heavy proportion of verse to prose. Aside from legal documents, almost any kind of subject matter or genre could be and often was versified: historical works, Biblical translations, religious instruction, fictional tales, even recipes and how-to materials. One reason for the preponderance of verse is that verse is easier to memorize than prose, an important consideration for a society in which a book was a major investment and literacy was low. Though Old English had had a strong tradition of good prose writing, this was almost totally destroyed by the Conquest. When literature once again began to be produced in English, it was at first primarily in verse; in any culture, good prose develops later than verse.

When writing in English began again after the disruption of the Conquest, English writers adopted French genres and forms wholesale. In most of the country and for most purposes, the native alliterative verse was abandoned for syllable-counting rhymed verse. The older tradition of heroic poetry gave way to new genres—the romance in particular.

The Middle English romances are represented by Layamon's *Brut* (a "history" of England that goes back to the legendary King Arthur and ancient Troy), the Pearl-poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (the tale of a challenge

and journey undertaken by one of Arthur's knights), and Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (a compendious cycle of Arthurian legends).

Toward the end of the ME period, drama appeared for the first time in English. The Middle English period saw the performance of cycle plays, stagings of Biblical episodes from Creation to Doom put on by craft guilds in the towns of York, Chester, Wakefield, and in the East Anglian region. Also important were the morality plays, such as *Mankind* and *Everyman*, which tell of one person's spiritual journey. The title character is tempted by various vices and encouraged by virtues to stay on the proper path. Shorter poems that fit comfortably into our modern (rather hazy) notions of a lyric (a short poem that expresses personal feelings) appear. The Middle English period even witnessed the first autobiography in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which was dictated by an illiterate, pious woman to two scribes. It tells of Margery's spiritual life, including her undertaking pilgrimages to Rome, the Holy Land, and the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. In other words, many of the literary genres of today are recognizably the descendants of ME forebears. Nonetheless, we still do not find such contemporary types as the novel and the short story.

Prose

Prose works in the Middle English period were various. They included codes of law, charters, wills, writs, deeds, romances, and travel narratives. A common type of prose was of the religious sort. The early (c. 1200) *Ancrene Riwe* (or, as some versions are called, *Ancrene Wisse*) was written by a cleric at the request of three noblewomen. It is dedicated but compassionate, idealistic but realistic, down-to-earth but warm and often humorous. It was composed for religious women who undertook the life of an anchoress, a recluse who lived in a small house attached to the side of a church. The quality of writing is high, perhaps higher than that of any other English prose work prior to Malory. The *Ancrene Riwe* is a fine early example of English writing because many texts of the time were in Latin or French. It was written for a less educated, female audience and so it had to be composed in English.

Saints' lives (hagiography) must have been extremely popular with ME audiences because so many of them have survived. Most of them bear about as much resemblance to reality as does the modern political campaign "biography." The so-called Katherine Group, written in heavily alliterative prose from the West Midlands, includes the lives of three virgin saints, along with two other religious treatises. Another vast collection, *The Golden Legend*, contains numerous saints' lives in addition to much other ecclesiastical material.

Collections of sermons and homilies from the period are too numerous even to list exhaustively. John Wycliffe (late fourteenth century) is best known today for the Biblical translations under his name (though he probably did little if any of the actual translating). However, he was also the author of a large number of surviving sermons that provide lively reading to this day. Many ME sermons and homilies include exempla, or short tales with a moral. Often the exemplum has

been added more for its entertainment value than for its didactic relevance, and the application of the moral may be far-fetched.

The writings of the English mystics, or religious visionaries, form a subcategory of their own. The best-known of these mystics were Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, all from the fourteenth century. Mystical writings by women include Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (late fourteenth century) and the rather hysterical but lively and colloquial *Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1430). Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwit* (c. 1340) is a translation into English prose of a French book on vices and virtues. The work is of linguistic interest as a relatively rare example of the Kentish dialect.

Secular Verse

In secular literature, the ME period is the age of the romance. To most people today, the term *romance* suggests a love story in prose. In medieval literature, however, it refers to a story of knightly adventure in which love is only a subordinate element. Most ME romances are in verse, though a few later ones are in prose. About fifty ME romances survive, varying in length from a few hundred to several thousand lines. They include some of the finest poetry ever written in English (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). The most common meter of the romances is rhymed iambic tetrameter, but a fair number (including *Sir Gawain*) are in the older alliterative meter, with or without accompanying rhyme.

Another important ME literary type is the debate, of which *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1200) is the earliest and the finest example in English. Topics range widely: body versus soul, rose versus lily, clerical lover versus knightly lover, summer versus winter. Often the author provides no "winner," but overtly tells the readers or listeners to decide for themselves.

The lyric makes its first appearance in English during the ME period, and hundreds of ME lyrics have survived, a number of them with accompanying music, suggesting that the type originated as songs. Celebrations of springtime and the tribulations of lovers are the most popular topics. (There are also many religious lyrics; the Passion and the Virgin Mary are especially prevalent themes.) The ME lyric set a precedent for later works in the genre, such as T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917).

Of course the most significant author of the Middle English period is Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), the so-called father of English literature. Chaucer is most famous for his collection *The Canterbury Tales*, a compendium of fabliaux, romances, saints' lives, and other religious literature. It is framed around a tale-telling competition engaged in by pilgrims traveling from Southwark to Canterbury Cathedral (about 60 miles), the site of Thomas Becket's martyrdom. Interesting is the fact that Chaucer never completed the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer intended each of his 29 pilgrims to tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. There are only twenty-four tales, with two of them being told by the Chaucer pilgrim himself. Chaucer's literary genius resides not so much in his powers of invention (he borrowed most of his tales

from French and Italian sources) but in his ability to adapt these tales into beautiful English poetry.

Particularly in the fifteenth century, there was a fair amount of satire written in English. Less well represented in ME outside of Chaucer are the fabliau, a short, humorous, bawdy tale, and the beast tale, a story in which the faults of human beings are indirectly attacked by putting men in the guise of animals.

All of these genres of secular verse were borrowed directly or indirectly from French. The ME romances in particular are often free—or even close—translations of French originals.

Religious and Didactic Verse

The amount of religious and didactic verse in Middle English is so vast that we can do little more here than enumerate some of the most outstanding types and examples. The range of this literature includes scriptural paraphrase and commentary, exempla in verse, saints' legends and lives, homilies, allegories, proverbs, and various combinations of these.

Though we earlier mentioned exempla (a moral anecdote used to illustrate a point) under prose, there were also collections of exempla in verse. The best known of these is John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390); Gower often seems more interested in the tales themselves than in their moral applications.

Saints' legends, although primarily a prose type, also were sometimes written in verse. Among the more interesting are narratives of visits to Hell, including the highly imaginative *St. Patrick's Purgatory* (c. 1325), *The Vision of St. Paul* (c. 1375), and *The Vision of Tundale* (c. 1400), all translations of Latin originals. Perhaps reflecting the rigors of the northern climate in which they originated, the Hell depicted in these poems includes not only fire and brimstone but also snow, ice, hail, and bitter winds.

We have focused here on works that are primarily or exclusively religious-didactic in nature. It should be noted, however, that many other ME works, though read today for other reasons, contain much didactic and religious material. Examples include *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, and even most of Chaucer's works.

Drama

Drama as a literary type and social phenomenon virtually disappeared in Europe from late antiquity until the late Middle Ages. When it did reappear, it was at first in the form of religious drama and indeed probably arose out of dramatization of parts of church services. The earliest English dramas were *cycle plays* (also known as mystery plays), based on biblical stories and written for the most part in verse. These plays were often performed by craftsmen's guilds outdoors. The York cycle was performed on Corpus Christi day (late May or early June). Scholars are less certain about when the other plays were performed and whether they were performed annually. Several collections, or cycles, of mystery plays survive, of which the best is the York cycle, consisting of about 50 plays. The first possible mention of the play cycle is a record of the rental of a pageant wagon in

York in 1377. The wagons provided moveable stages that traveled to about twelve stations throughout the city. The final performance of the York play was in 1569, after the Protestant Reformation banned the play's production due to their religious subject matter, which reflected on medieval rather than Reformed piety.

Morality plays, in which the principal characters are personified abstractions such as Vice, Good Deeds, and Friendship, appeared later than mystery plays. Some of these are extremely long with huge casts of characters. The finest of the morality plays, *Everyman*, dates from about 1500, at the very end of the ME period. Its message of the terror and loneliness of impending death has such universal appeal that the play is regularly revived and performed to this day.

In sum, the Middle English period saw not so much a rebirth of English literature as the birth of a new English literature based on Continental models rather than the earlier Germanic traditions. Although Latin remained the language of "serious" literature, English steadily gained respectability as a language for more popular literature. Chaucer could have written in French had he wished to, but he chose English. The fact that his work was not only popular in England but was actually praised in France demonstrates how far the prestige of English had risen since the years immediately following the Conquest.

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

- Phonologically, voiced fricatives became phonemic. By the end of ME, phonemic length in consonants had been lost, but length remained phonemic for vowels.
- Morphologically, there was a steady loss of inflections. By the end of ME, the inflectional system was essentially that of PDE except for the preservation of separate second-person singular and second-person plural pronouns and verbs.
- Syntactically, word order became more like that of PDE, but differences remained; for example, pronoun objects frequently preceded verbs. Indefinite and definite articles began to be used. The complex system of verb phrases that characterizes PDE was developing.
- Lexically, ME saw an explosion of loanwords. Early in ME, many Norse loans appeared in texts for the first time. Later, vast numbers of French loans entered ME, along with numerous Latin loans. ME continued to form new words from native resources as well as borrowed elements.
- In literature, the ME period began with the use of French and Latin as the main languages in which to compose texts. By the fourteenth century, English had become the language in which to compose literary, political, and religious texts.

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